

Chillin' in Another World

WITH LV 2

SUPER CHEAT POWERS



2



Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri



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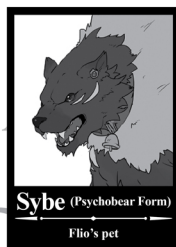
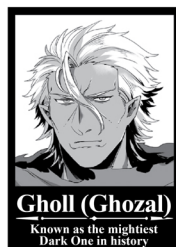
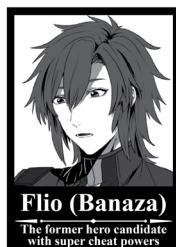
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Story by Miya Kinojo ∞ Illustrations by Katagiri

Characters

Chillin' in Another
World with Level 2
Super Cheat Powers



Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers

Chapter 1: The Lay of the Land

◇Somewhere in a Forest◇

Without any warning, a magic portal appeared deep in the woods. As it stabilized, a man and a woman took form.

Rys stepped onto the ground, and looked out towards a village she could see on the other side of the forest. “Is that it, my lord husband?”

“No mistaking it,” said Flio. “That’s the place.” He made sure the circle closed properly behind him and set off running for the village.

“Wait, my love!” Rys cried. “If we go in looking like this, they’ll figure out who we are!”

“Oh! That’s right!” Flio stopped in his tracks at Rys’s words and began to cast a spell on himself, materializing a blue-furred wolf mask over his head. He reached up and adjusted it slightly to make sure that it was in order and then looked back towards his wife. “Does this look good, Rys?” he asked.

“Yes, perfect!”

“Right, then let’s hurry!” Once more, Flio ran off.

“Yes!” called Rys, running alongside him. Her white dress sparkled before vanishing. Now naked, her human form shifted until she became a silver-furred lupine demon. Together they left the forest, running all out for the village—Flio wearing a blue wolf mask, and Rys, a silver lupine.



◇The Village◇

“Wha— What’s that?!”

“The Dark Army?!”

Screams sounded throughout the village as the people ran in confusion. A force of goblins was bearing down on them—about thirty of the small monsters. Behind them were two ogres, swinging enormous metal clubs as they advanced. They seemed to be the ones in charge.

“Why is an army like this attacking our village?”

This village was nothing more than a small town within the borders of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. As it had very little in the way of strategic value, during the whole course of the long war with the Dark Army it had never come under attack. The few soldiers stationed there were not intended to fight against an army, but to drive away wild Magic Beasts that might attack the village.

The captain drew his sword. “All soldiers, retreat!” he ordered. They had no chance of winning, he figured, but if they could make it to the neighboring village, where a much larger force was stationed... “Protect the citizens and withdraw to the next village!” He himself prepared to take the rear.

“Eeeek!” Before the captain’s eyes, a girl fleeing for her life tripped over a stone and fell to the ground.

“Watch out!” He rushed towards the girl as the goblins attacked her.

She held her head, her body stiff. “*Nooo!*” She shut her eyes tight, but no matter how long she waited, the goblins never so much as touched her. Thinking it strange that she hadn’t been harmed, she opened her eyes. She looked up to find a man followed by a silver wolf: Flio and Rys.

“Hmm?” said a goblin. “And who might *you* be?” The goblins leered at the two newcomers. They had appeared so suddenly, and the goblins were angry to be robbed of their sport.

Flio, his face and identity concealed by his blue wolf mask, faced the goblins and slowly raised his arms. “If you leave quietly, we will allow you to go in peace,” he said. “However, harm any one of these villagers and we will show you no mercy.”

“A joke!” said a goblin. “Do not make us laugh!”

“I believe this man has said something quite foolish, yes,” said the first one again. The goblins all snickered at Flio’s bravado.

From behind Flio, Rys growled in anger. “Such lowly creatures *dare* to belittle my husband?!” She bared her fangs, her fur bristling fiercely.

“Hmm?” said the second goblin. “No... Why would a *lupine demon* be here?!”

“A demon, siding with the likes of a human?” said the first as he and his fellows backed up in dismay at Rys’s wrathful aura, realizing at last just what she was. Even among demons, lupines were known as a particularly fearsome species.

The two ogres stepped out from behind the line of goblins. “What are you lot all scared of?”

“There’s no reason to be afraid of a spineless lupine who let a *human* domesticate her!”

“Yeah! We’ll crush ‘em in a single blow!” They charged towards Flio and Rys, swinging their clubs and laughing uproariously.

“I will show you the difference between us, *scum*,” said Rys, lowering her weight onto her hind legs to launch herself at the ogres. But Flio held his right hand before her muzzle, stopping her. “My lord?”

“There’s no need, Rys,” he said. “I’ll take care of them.” He extended his left arm towards the ogres.

“Ooh, what’s this? A wimpy human thinks he can take on an ogre?” said one of them in a mocking tone.

“Gah ha ha!” the other laughed. “How reckless can you get?!”

Suddenly, the ogres felt an immense force pressing down on them. The pressure was too much even to speak. They fought back for everything they were worth, but in seconds they had collapsed to the ground, unable to move a muscle. It was like they had been transfixed to the earth with a great spear.

The goblins were in dismay at the sight. “B-Boss?!”

“Hey, what’s happening?! Hey!”

With the ogres immobilized, Flio turned to face the goblins. “I will say it again,” he said. “If you leave quietly, we will allow you to go in peace. However, harm any one of these villagers and we will show you no mercy.” The goblins swallowed, frozen stiff by fear. They stood facing Flio.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” A single goblin broke ranks and ran off towards the forest at full tilt, terrified. At that, the spell seemed to be broken. The rest of the goblins fled as one after their companion as the villagers shouted in fervent joy.

“Run awaaaay!”

“Someone... Someone heeeelp!”

After he was certain the goblins had left, Flio released his Gravitation spell. The ogres, however, lay where they had fallen, not even twitching. Flio smacked himself in the head.

“My lord? Is something wrong?” asked Rys.

“No... Not really. I think I put too much power behind my spell. It

looks like I broke their bones.” He scratched the back of his head behind the wolf mask he was wearing as he walked up to the ogres. “I just barely avoided killing them...” He put one hand on each of their heads and began to heal them.

“Well,” said Rys, unable to stop herself from chuckling softly, “I suppose even *you* can make mistakes.”

Flio tilted his head to the side, embarrassed. “When they called you ‘spineless’ and ‘domesticated,’ I got a bit...you know.” His mouth, visible beneath his mask, was screwed up in an awkward expression.

Rys drew close and nuzzled against him. “My love, you did that for me?” She closed her eyes, rubbing her fluffy, reddening cheeks against Flio’s body.

◇Afterwards◇

The two ogres, their multiple broken bones healed by Flio’s magic, bowed again and again before Flio and Rys. “You spared our lives...even healed us...”

“We’re sorry. We’re in your debt.”

Still wearing his mask, Flio waved his hand. “As long as you stop troubling humans, nothing more needs to be said. But don’t think I’ll spare you again.”

“M-Mmm... We, um...”

“We understand!” Still bowing over and over, the ogres returned to the forest.

A look that seemed somehow dissatisfied came over Rys’s lupine muzzle as she watched the ogres go. “My lord husband,” she said, “was that wise? If they’re ordered to, they’re sure to attack humans again.”

“If it happens, we’ll drive them off again,” said Flio.

“But if you finished them off, there would be no need to worry...”

“That’s true,” said Flio. “But it might also be the cause of another grudge between humans and demons. I really do believe that our peoples can come to understand one another.” He gave Rys a pointed look. “Just like you and I have.”

Rys curled up against Flio’s feet, rubbing affectionately. “I understand, my love,” she said. “If that is your goal, I will do everything I can to help.” Flio gently pet her fur.

“Excuse me?” The villagers, who had been preparing to evacuate in the back of the village, timidly approached Flio from behind. A middle-aged man stepped forward and bowed his head. “Th-Thank you so much for saving our village.” Behind him, the crowd of villagers bowed as well.

Flio shook his hand, lightly dismissing their thanks. “There’s no need to bow,” he said. “I just did what anyone would.” The villagers

looked relieved at those words.

But after a while, Flio could hear a whispered conversation in the back of the assembled villagers. Thanks to his magically enhanced hearing, he could clearly make out the words. “Hey, how come that man’s hiding his face with a mask?”

“Is he a demon? Is that why he’s hiding his identity?”

“What if he’s working with the ogres?”

Flio grimaced sardonically. *I just wanted to hide my identity to prevent anyone from coming to bother me...* “Worry not,” he said, holding out his right arm to the side in a grand gesture. “The Princess herself requested that I protect you from the Dark Army.” The people began to cheer.

A man who seemed to be the captain of the guard approached Flio. “We are very fortunate that Her Highness sent you,” he said and bowed deeply. “I must thank you again for your aid. We are truly grateful.”

“There’s really no need. As I said, this was a request from the Princess. If you want to thank someone, thank her.” Flio returned the guard captain’s bow, lowering his head slightly, and then headed back to the forest, Rys by his side.

As they left, they could hear the voices of grateful villagers shouting after them. “Thank you!”

“We won’t forget this!”

As he watched them leave, the captain of the guard muttered under his breath. “The Wolf of Justice, in the flesh...”

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

Flio and Rys used Teleportation and appeared back at their front door. Flio released his magic and took off the mask while Rys, beside him, transformed into her human form, still stark naked. Her body shone, and suddenly she was again wearing her white dress.

“The Dark Army has been rather quiet of late, hasn’t it?” Rys mused.

Flio nodded. “I’d like it if both humans and demons stopped fighting and tried working together.”

“That’s going to be rather difficult, isn’t it?” said Rys. “Humans and demons have been at war for many, many years...”

“True. It’s gonna be hard. But still...” Flio pulled Rys in close, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and smiling at her. “We did it, didn’t we? We’re living proof that it isn’t impossible, or so I want to believe.”

“That... That’s true, I suppose...” Rys seemed deep in thought, conflict written on her face. After a while she knit her eyebrows, just slightly. “By the way, my lord,” she said. “Did you really have to turn

down a reward for the Princess's request? Even *she* thought you should be compensated fairly for your help, yet you refused. Isn't that a bit too soft of you?"

Flio smiled bashfully. "Oh," he said, "the Dark Army hasn't been very active lately, you know? I figured that between the two of us it wouldn't take too much work to drive them off."

"And what about you letting the attackers go? If the Dark One orders them to, they're sure to just attack again."

"I have faith that not all of them will, though," Flio said. "Demons are living beings with emotions. If the demons we spare give it some thought, maybe some of them will question whether they should really be at war with the humans. If I kill the attacking demons, it would only make them hate humans more. Nothing will change if I do that. Things will just keep on going the way they have been." He gave Rys a gentle smile. "I want our children to live in a world where they can play happily alongside both human and demon children."

Those words made Rys's face turn red. She cast her eyes down in embarrassment. "Y-Yes, you're right," she said. "Our children..." For a while she stayed like that, and then she turned her face up to look at her husband. "It's funny... What you're saying is absurd, but..." Her next words were said with a smile. "If anyone can do it, it would be you, my lord. I might not be as strong as you, but I will help in any way I can."

Rys closed her eyes gently, and Flio leaned in to kiss her softly on the lips.

◇Meanwhile, Inside◇

Inside the house, Balirossa, Blossom, Byleri, and Belano saw that Flio and Rys had returned and began to head outside to welcome them home. Balirossa spoke up. "Did you hear what Lord Flio said?" she asked. The other three nodded vigorously.

"That's Lord Flio for you," said Blossom, bobbing her head up and down. She clearly admired him. "He thinks big."

"Is there anything we can do?" asked Byleri, nodding along as Blossom spoke. "I, like, wanna help him?"

Belano was also nodding alongside her friends. "Me too," she said.

Balirossa glanced around at her three partners and nodded, satisfied. "Yes," she said. "We are imposing on his hospitality, after all. We are still weak compared to them, but there must be some way we can assist Lord Flio and Lady Rys."

Balirossa the knight, Blossom the heavy soldier, Byleri the archer, and Belano the witch. Once, these four served as knights of Klyrode Castle. Flio had once saved them from Magic Beasts in the forest. One thing led to another, and they eventually left the castle to lodge at

Flio's house.

"Well, I'll try and make our garden even bigger so those two will have lots of tasty vegetables to eat!" Blossom confidently struck her fist to her chest. Blossom was from a farming family, and had used that experience to tend to the large garden behind Flio's house. She had been gradually expanding the growing area.

"Um? Then, I'll do my best with the horses!" Byleri flexed her slender arms. Despite her best efforts, she looked for all the world like a stiff breeze could break her in half. Byleri had a real talent for dealing with horses and had built a pasture alongside Blossom's garden. Flio and Rys would sometimes bring her relatively gentle horse-type beasts they captured for her to raise. Sometimes she would lend them to traveling merchants.

Belano screwed her face up in determination. "I'll do my best with my magic..." Belano had been attending the College of Magic in Houghtow City in an attempt to improve her weak attack magic at least a little. However, when the college learned of her talent with defensive magic they offered her a faculty position as a defensive magic instructor.

Balirossa surveyed the three and smiled, nodding her head. Balirossa was the unofficial leader of the group. She had been training her sword skills under Flio, and spent her days hunting and training in the nearby forest, which was home to relatively weak Magic Beasts. When she was home, she devoted herself to keeping the floors sparkling clean. "Well then," she said, holding her chest high, "I shall —"

"Hey," Blossom interrupted, "why don't you try and seduce the Dark One Gholl?"

"*Excuse me?!*" Balirossa's eyes went wide. She had never expected to hear words like that from Blossom.

"Um, yeah!" said Byleri. "The Dark One's, like, totally into you?" She touched her index finger to her cheek and nodded. Next to her, Belano nodded emphatically.

As for Balirossa, she went bright red, a look of dismay on her face. "D-D-Don't be ridiculous!" she cried. "Wh-Wh-Why should I have to do something like that?! And you're *wrong!* Yes, he used to disguise himself as a human and come visit when we lived in the old place, but he wasn't coming to see me, he was coming to visit Lord Flio!"

"But Balirossa," said Blossom, "He'd always leave right quick when you weren't around."

"Yeah, didn't he?" said Byleri. "Like, he's so easy to read?"

Belano said nothing. She just quietly nodded in agreement.

Balirossa was on the verge of panic as the three surrounded her, endlessly chattering away. Then, behind them, Hiya appeared. Hiya,

the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, had once been dealt a crushing defeat by Flio. Ever since, they had taken to referring to him as the “Exalted One” and called themselves his servant. As always, it was hard to tell if their narrow eyes were open or closed. They tilted their head, giving the others a dubious look. “What are you doing loitering here?” they said. “The Exalted One and his wife have returned. Is it not an act of impiety not to welcome them home?”

“Oh!” shouted Balirossa, rushing to open the door. “Yes, you’re right!” However, no sooner had she opened the door than she shut it tight again, turning her back to it and pressing against it.

“Hey, hey, what’s up, Balirossa?” Blossom stopped in her tracks, looking at Balirossa with an expression of surprise.

Balirossa was embarrassed and blushing when she answered. “O-Oh,” she said. She did her best to string words together, but they came out as an incoherent mess. “It’s j-just...Lord Flio and Lady Rys are... They’re in the middle of...of...stuff.”

Everyone felt like they understood the gist of it from Balirossa’s disposition. They smirked. “Lord Flio and Lady Rys are so lovey-dovey, right?” said Byleri. “Like, I wanna have a marriage like that someday, y’know?” She folded her arms and looked languidly up at the ceiling.

The others looked at Byleri, and everyone burst out into laughter at once.

◇The Living Room◇

A unicorn rabbit—Sybe—sprung out from the big cot to the side of the living room, alerted by the sound of voices from the entryway. It snuffled cutely and sniffed around, taking in the scents of the area. When it caught Flio’s and Rys’s scents, it made a joyful squeaking snuffle and dashed excitedly for the door. As it went, the rabbit’s body transformed, taking the form of an enormous psychobear.

Sybe was a psychobear originally, but lately had been spending most of its time in its unicorn rabbit form. It had the ability to change between its forms at will, but had a habit of accidentally turning back into a psychobear when it got excited. Sybe, enthusiastic to welcome Flio home, rushed for the door. However, between it and the door was Balirossa’s party. They were gathered around, waiting for a good time to go outside, blocking Sybe’s way. Undaunted, Sybe began to push them aside with its giant body. The four began to cry out.

“Aaah!” shouted Balirossa. “Sybe! Don’t push me!”

“Wha—” Blossom was in disarray. “That *hurts*, Sybe!”

“Oh, oh no!” said Byleri. “Um, help?”

Belano said nothing. She had been dazed.

Hiya, who had quickly teleported out of Sybe’s way, smirked at

them. “My,” they said, “such consternation.” Balirossa held out her arm, attempting to beg for Hiya’s help, but couldn’t get a word out due to Sybe’s body crushing her. “Oh, very well,” Hiya said. “I suppose I shall lend you my aid.” They walked towards the psychobear.

◇Outside the Front Door◇

“Do you hear that?” said Flio, pulling away from his wife. “Something’s happening inside.”

“It must be Sybe coming to greet us...” murmured Rys, still lost in the afterglow of their kiss. Flio hugged her close and began to walk up to the door.

Suddenly the door burst open and a jubilant Sybe came flying out. Flio spread his arms wide. “We’re home, Sybe!” he said as he cast the spell Empower on his body.

“Grwooo!” Sybe rushed him, but Flio caught the bear in his arms, easily stopping it in its tracks.

Flio beamed. “There’s a good bear,” he said, petting Sybe’s head. “Have you been behaving yourself?”

A psychobear at full charge can produce an unbelievable amount of force. Even a high-level magic user couldn’t pull off Flio’s stunt. Even if they were to cast Empower on themselves, the psychobear would still send them flying. Flio’s absurdly powerful magic, however, let him take the full force of Sybe’s jubilant rush with no trouble at all. There were hardly any magic users in the realm who could cast such a powerful Empower spell. Naturally, Flio had no idea just how extraordinary this was.

Sybe licked Flio’s grinning face as he kept on petting.

Balirossa’s party stumbled out of the door. Thanks to Hiya, they had narrowly avoided their “grizzly” fate of becoming a knight sandwich.

“L-Lord Flio...” Balirossa stammered. “Welcome... Welcome home...”

“Good job...out there...today,” Blossom managed. “Haaah...”

“Ah ha ha,” Byleri giggled. “Like, welcome home? Ohhh, my eyes are spinning...”

Belano said nothing. She looked like she was about to throw up.

The four were staggering aimlessly in a sorry state. “Is that how you present yourselves before the Exalted One?” Hiya emerged from the door behind them, sighing deeply as they looked over Balirossa’s group. “Do it properly.”

Flio smiled at everyone who had come to greet him. “I’m home!” he said. “It’s good to see you all.”



◇Klyrode Castle—Throne Room◇

The Princess sat on her throne.

Not long ago, her father—the King—had assembled every witch and mage in the castle to combine their magic to drive off the Dark Army with the *ne plus ultra* of holy magic: Purification. He, too, added his power to the spell. As a result, he had succumbed to Magic Exhaustion and fell into a deep sleep. Under the legal code of Klyrode, until the King awakened, the Princess was to serve as regent.

Her ministers and the captains of her knights were lined up along the throne room. One of her spies had come with information on the affairs of the different regions of her kingdom. “My report: Since withdrawing their attacking force from the castle, the Dark Army has stationed units at strategic locations and made no further moves. Our army and our allies among the neighboring kingdoms have gone to confront them, but in every case our armies are stuck in deadlock, only staring down the enemy. In short, we are in a stalemate.”

The Princess breathed a sigh of relief. It sounded like there was no grand clash of the armies on the horizon. “I believe our soldiers on the front lines must be psychologically exhausted by now,” she said. “Forcing them to hold the line as we have been must have an effect on morale. I propose we rotate our soldiers every fortnight. We should allow half of our stationed forces to return home and replace them with fresh soldiers from the castle. By doing so, we would allow them to rest and recover their spirits.”

One of the knight captains stepped forward. “Your Highness,” he said, “would this not require us to mobilize every guard stationed in the castle? What of our defenses?”

The Princess looked back at her captain and nodded sharply. “That is no matter,” she said. “Leave some guards to defend the castle and mobilize the rest. It is my judgment that our highest priority right now should be maintaining the morale of our soldiers on the front lines, not defending the castle.”

The captain nodded. The Princess’s words had a certain commanding awe to them, which he could only respect. “I see that you are not speaking lightly, Your Highness,” he said. “We, your knights, shall work with the guard to implement your plan posthaste. We will restructure the castle’s defenses to use only a small number of elite soldiers.”

“Knight Captain Valkas,” said the Princess, “thank you.” Valkas struck his fist to his chest in a salute, and the Princess turned her attention back to the spy. “Tell me,” she said, “what of the small raids the Dark Army has been conducting in the distant provinces?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” he reported. “The Dark Army has been sending small bands of guerrilla fighters to make these attacks. Every day there are more incidents.”

“I see...” The Princess’s expression darkened at the news. The Dark Army had begun these attacks at around the same time as their armies had fallen into the current deadlock. Over and over again, they would strike at targets with no strategic value: towns or villages or settlements far from the castle. She could discern no clear strategy behind them. The Princess would have liked to deploy knights and guards to defend every region of the kingdom, but with most of their forces deployed to the front, there simply wasn’t enough manpower.

“However,” the spy said, pausing before continuing his report. “I was unable to confirm this information, but we have heard many stories in many different regions of the Dark Army being driven off by a mysterious adventurer.”

Knight Captain Valkas spoke up. “A mysterious adventurer?” he asked. “What do you mean by that?”

The spy nodded as he leafed through his report. “Yes, according to this, he is a man wearing a blue wolf mask and is accompanied by a silver wolf. It seems he appears to drive off the Dark Army and then vanishes from the area.”

“Just like that?” asked Valkas. “He doesn’t ask for money or anything?”

“Correct,” said the spy. “So it seems. It’s been reported that this man claims to have been asked by the Princess to protect the people, and that their gratitude should be paid instead to Her Highness.”

The Princess raised her head at those words. “A masked adventurer...and a wolf...” *There’s no doubt about it! That must be Lord Flio. He’s started to move, like I asked him to!* When the raids had started to become a frequent occurrence, the Princess had been wrought with worry. In her desperation, she had sent Flio a letter, telling him frankly of her situation—that most of her army was tied up fending off the Dark One’s main force, while the Dark Army took advantage of the lack of soldiers to launch small raids against which they found themselves unable to defend. She had asked him for any help he would see fit to offer. She had even promised him a reward for his assistance.

The letter she received in reply read: “I’ll do it. Never mind the reward.”

He declined a reward, she thought, but I really must find some way to pay him back... “Yes,” she said, finally. “That would indeed be the adventurer I hired.”

Cheers rang out throughout the throne room. “Oh, you had someone like that in your employ?”

“Well, what do you know! Her Highness has been taking care of things behind the scenes!”

“Yes, she always knows what to do.”

Finally, the Princess managed to get some words in edgewise. “Send word to our armies in every region of our kingdom: if they should see this man, render him what aid you are able!”

“Yes, Your Highness!” cried everyone at once, bowing in supplication.

The Princess glanced around the throne room before turning her attention once more to the spy. “Soldier,” she said, “is there any news of the Golden-Haired Hero, who escaped custody with one of the castle’s treasures?”

“No, Your Highness. Wanted posters have been sent to the guards everywhere in the Kingdom, but there has been no news yet...”

“We must capture the Golden-Haired Hero and retrieve his title,” said the Princess. “Then, we will be free to give the title of ‘Hero’ to whom it rightly belongs.” The title “Hero” could only be held by one person at a time. As long as someone with that title existed in the world, a new Hero could not be named. Therefore, they would have to strip it from him with the spell De-appellation. “Send out such a directive.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” said the spy, bowing deeply. “It shall be done.”

We must retrieve that title, the Princess thought, clenching her fist tight. And then, we can give it to Lord Flio...to whom it rightly belongs.



The Princess’s words of the adventurer in a blue wolf mask and his silver wolf were spread far and wide in no time at all. The people living under the shadow of the Dark Army welcomed the rumors with jubilation. Eventually the townsfolk and soldiers alike began to call him by a certain name, a name that reflected their deep reverence for the adventurer in the wolf mask.

Their protector—the Wolf of Justice.

◇Deep in a Forest◇

A group of soldiers rushed through the forest. “Did you find them?!”

“No, they’re not there either!”

The soldiers held chains, enchanted to bind almost anyone. They looked for all the world like they were searching for someone.

“Are you certain our targets are in the area?”

“Yes, sir. Marcobia the woodcutter claims to have seen a man and

woman resembling the two on the wanted posters walking in this forest...”

“We have no reason to doubt his words. Right, let’s widen the scope of our hunt!”

“Yes, sir!”

The soldiers rushed deeper into the woods.

◇Some Time Later◇

Near where the soldiers had gathered a second ago, there was a tree. Near its roots, a rag someone had thrown away carelessly moved slowly to the side, revealing a hole. A man’s head poked out and very carefully looked around the area. “Okay,” he said. “I think they’re gone.” Certain that there was no danger nearby, he crawled quickly out of the hole and onto the ground. “Come out, Tsuya, now’s our chance! Let’s run in the direction those guards came from!”

“H-Hold on, my Lord Hero Gold-Haaair!” came a voice. “My... My butt...” A woman wearing a very provocative outfit underneath her cloak tried to follow the man—Hero Gold-Hair—out of the hole, but her butt was stuck in the entrance. She couldn’t get out.

“Hey!” said Hero Gold-Hair. “What are you doing?! We have to hurry before the guards come back!” He clicked his tongue in annoyance and walked back, taking Tsuya firmly by the hand.

“Oooohh,” she said, tears running down her cheeks as Hero Gold-Hair helped her out of the hole. “I’m *sooo* embarrassed!” Tsuya’s eyes turned to the large shovel the Hero had tied to his belt. “But that Drilldozer Shovel is amazing, isn’t it, Hero Gold-Haaair?”

“Indeed!” he said, looking at his shovel as he kept pulling. “Well, it was one of those treasures locked away in the castle sanctuary, after all! It’s hard to believe I dug that hole in just a single second...”



Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya had been moving through the forest. The area was completely surrounded by guards searching for them. Hero Gold-Hair had taken the Drilldozer Shovel out of his Bottomless Bag and dug a hole to hide in by an inconspicuous tree.

“You dug *suuuch* a big hole in the blink of an eye!” said Tsuya. “And I thought things were looking hopeless...”

“Silly girl,” he retorted. “Hero Gold-Hair is *not* going to be caught by the likes of them! Don’t be so quick to give up!”

“O-Oh, I’m *sooorry*!”

Hero Gold-Hair grunted as he redoubled his efforts to pull Tsuya out from the hole. “You’re *really* stuck in there...” he said. “Come on...come...out!”

“My Lord Hero Gold-Haaair! It’s working! It’s—ah?” Tsuya could feel a strange sensation of something sliding down her lower body just as she was on the verge of being pulled free from the hole. “Wait, My Lord!” she cried. “Something’s sliding down my legs!”

“Shut up!” he hissed. Tsuya had raised her voice without thinking. “Do you want the soldiers to find us?!”

But it was too late. Soldiers were coming in their direction, drawn by Tsuya’s voice. “Was this where that voice came from?”

“Yes, sir, I believe so!”

“Look!” said Hero Gold-Hair. “They’re going to catch us at this rate! I’m going to have to pull you out in one go!”

“Whaaa? This is important! Can’t you wait a second?!”

“I can’t! Now or never!” He pulled hard, and Tsuya’s undergarments slid off her body and into the hole, never to be seen again.

“Oh, oh nooo!” she said. “I liked those! Can we go down and—”

“Idiot! There’s no time! We have to go!”

“O-Oh...”

Hero Gold-Hair pulled Tsuya along and vanished into the forest.

◇Some Time Later◇

The soldiers happened upon a suspicious hole by the trunk of a tree and looked inside to investigate. One soldier went in, while the others stood at its entrance.

“Well? Did you find anything?”

“It looks like this fell in, but that’s it,” said the soldier in the hole, holding up a piece of cloth.

“What’s that? A handkerchief?”

“It... It looks like a woman’s undergarments, sir.”

“That tiny thing? Seems like hardly enough cloth to be underwear.”

“I wonder if it’s a mask...”

“A mask? You think someone wore that on their face?”

“Well, you know. Haven’t you heard about the famous masked adventurer?”

“That thing looks like a *string*!”

“Maybe you should try wearing it.”

“Me? No way!”

The soldiers stood around passing Tsuya’s abandoned undergarments between them, looking it over and proposing many different theories as to its provenance and use.

◇The Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

Gholl the Dark One was on his throne, his eyes shut. Before him, Uliminas the Hellcat, his confederate, knelt and bowed her head. “You *still* do not know where Flio and his company went?” Gholl’s voice was quiet.

Uliminas lowered her head still further. “I apologize most purrfusely,” she said. “My spies, the Silent Listeners, are searching the whole kingdom of Klyrode, but there’s just meowthing...” She could feel nervous sweat running down her forehead. It had been months since the Dark One had given the order to search for the whereabouts of Flio, who had vanished suddenly along with his companions. True to her word, Uliminas had sent all thirty of the elite Silent Listeners to search the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, but they still had found no information concerning Flio.

It’s purrculiar... she thought, casting her eyes down in front of the Dark One, fighting back a cold sweat. *The only place my spies can’t get in is Klyrode Castle, thanks to that magic wall... How come they can’t get any information at meowll?*

There was, of course, a reason for this: the barrier Flio had erected around Houghtow City, where his house was. This barrier was not a physical obstacle—rather, any demon who tried to cross would find themselves turned in another direction, without any awareness of what had happened. Ordinarily, such a barrier would attract the attention of the Silent Listeners. However, the barrier Flio used was also hidden with high-level concealment magics that enabled it to evade the notice of even that elite force. The Silent Listeners never managed to conduct an investigation of Houghtow.

Gholl kept his silence after Uliminas gave her report and continued to kneel. To her, that time felt like an eternity.

“Well,” he said at last, “I suppose if you can’t find him, then that’s that.”

“Y-Y-Yes my liege!” Uliminas responded, a little too loudly, and bowed her head even deeper.

Gholl opened his eyes and glanced at her. “We must find a way to influence Flio as soon as possible.”

“I...understand,” Uliminas hesitated.

“Hm? What is it, Uliminas? Speak your mind.”

“W-With all respect, Dark Meown,” she said, “I know that human is powerful, but is it worth pawsing our invasion just to look for him? The Silent Listeners say that Klyrode Castle still doesn’t have enough mages left to use Purrrification, their meowst powerful holy magic. If we take this oppurrtnunity to attack again, it’ll be like taking candy from a baby. No matter how strong that man Flio is, he can’t stop a

full invasion..."

"Have you forgotten? That man is capable of casting Purification entirely by himself!"

"That... That's still unconfirmed..."

"Hrm. Then, all the more reason to investigate him." Gholl slowly rose from his throne. "As long as such a threat exists, I will not allow my army to move unprepared. First, find Flio. Then, I will invite him to the Dark Citadel. While he is enjoying our hospitality, I will ask him to join our army. If I can achieve this, I care not what methods you use."

"Y-Yes, Dark Meown!" Uliminas once more bowed her head.



Gholl sighed quietly as he sat back down on his throne. Uliminas had left, and now he was alone in the throne room. "It's true, Flio is important..." he muttered, and looked up at the ceiling. "Oh Balirossa... My lovely human knight. Where could you be? Are you keeping well?"

He sighed again, more deeply.

◇Meanwhile, at the Houghtow City Adventurers' Association◇

"Hwah?!" Balirossa's voice came out in an erratic burst, startling Mimew, the cat girl working the reception desk at the Adventurers' Association.

"Balirossa?" asked Mimew. "What's wrong?"

"No! No, nothing's wrong," she said. "Nothing at all!"

"Are you sure? Well...I suppose it's none of my business. Wait here, I'll collect your reward."

"O-Okay, thank you..." Balirossa watched as Mimew disappeared into the backroom, hugging herself tight.

"What was that chill just now...?" she muttered, trembling. "My whole body felt cold. It's like the Dark One himself was staring at me..."

◇In a Corridor of the Dark Citadel◇

Uliminas kneaded her forehead as she walked down the hallway, away from the throne room. "Lord Gholl can say that," she muttered to herself, "but there are demons calling him a wimp for obsessing over that man...even trying to go attack on their meown..."

Above the corridor, in a gap between the gargoyles, a figure was looking down at Uliminas. They hid in the shadow of a statue, watching as she passed. Uliminas, absorbed in her thoughts as she

walked, took no notice of her observer. She turned right at the end of the corridor, out of sight, and the figure vanished.

Chapter 2: The Silent Listener

◇Houghtow City◇

Once every several days, Flio and Rys would leave their house outside the city walls to head into town together. Today was one such day. Their main errand was to sell the gear and magic items Flio had made at specialty stores in the city. After that was finished, the pair would find a restaurant for lunch.

“Good morning, Mister Flio!” The fresh-faced guard gave them an easygoing greeting at the city gate. “Here for some business again?”

“Good morning Mister Orwe, you have the right of it!” Flio smiled and waved. He and Rys were both known to the guards and were able to enter the city simply on the basis of their faces. As they passed through the gate and into the city, Flio turned to Rys, who had pressed herself close to his left side. “What are you in the mood to eat today, Rys?”

Rys pressed a finger to her lips, giving it some thought. “Well, let me think,” she said. “You know, there’s a new restaurant that just opened on the corner of Sucana Avenue. I’ve been curious to try it. How does that sound, my love?”

“Oh, you’re right! They’re still in the middle of their grand opening, aren’t they?” said Flio. “That sounds good to me! Is that where you want to go?”

“Yes!” Rys smiled and wrapped her arms around her husband. Flio couldn’t help but smile himself at her affections.

Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks. “Hm?”

“What’s the matter, my husband?” Flio looked confused. Rys followed his line of sight to see where he had been looking. It was a general store to the side of where they were walking. However, the store had no signpost, and through the windows they could see that the counters were bare.

“That was Pauldi’s shop, wasn’t it?” Flio asked.

“Yes,” mused Rys. “I believe you’re right. They were doing business just last week...”

“New shops open, and old shops close,” he said with a sigh. “It’s a little sad, somehow.”

The two left the shop behind them and began to move on when a voice hailed them from outside the Adventurers’ Association. “Lord Flio, Lady Rys!” It was Balirossa. She had just stepped out of the

building and ran up to the two of them, smiling.

“Hey, Balirossa! You’re in town today?”

“Yes!” she said. “I came here to claim bounties for the Magic Beasts I slew in the forest.” She cheerfully held up the sack containing her freshly earned coin. She was grinning widely. “Of course, my skills still have me far behind the two of you, but I am still proud to have reached the point where I can earn bounties like this on my own prowess. I truly owe you a great debt for your tutelage, my lord and lady.”

Flio smiled at his student. “I’m glad to hear that too, and I can’t wait to see how much stronger you get!”

“Thank you! I’ll do my best!” Balirossa bowed her head. “Might I ask what brings you into town today?”

“I’m just off to sell some magic gems I made to a general store, and then the two of us are planning on grabbing lunch.”

“Splendid!” Balirossa chirruped. “I was about to get lunch myself! Perhaps I could treat the two of you? Only if I’m not intruding, of course.” Once again she held up her bag of coins. “I owe my current prowess to your discipline, after all. Without you I would never be able to earn bounties like this. I know it isn’t an adequate thanks for your generosity, but I would be very happy if you would allow me to do this.”

Flio found himself charmed by Balirossa’s cheery mood. “I’m fine with it. Rys?”

“Oh?” Rys said, “Um, I mean, m-me?!” Rys had been staring down at the road, muttering like she was casting a spell, “*She’s intruding on my lunch with my husband... Intruding on my lunch with my husband...*” Flio had startled her out of her thoughts. “Y-Y-Y-Yes...if my lord husband says so, I’m... I’m fine with it...”

Flio smirked knowingly and pressed his lips up against her ear and whispered, “Rys, let’s get lunch again tomorrow. Just the two of us.”

Rys’s face flushed. “All right, let’s go!” she said, suddenly in high spirits. “Three-person lunch today!”

Flio and Balirossa shared a look.



The three walked down the streets, towards Flio’s usual general store. Rys gently held her husband’s hand, sticking close but matching his steps and minding her position to not get in the way of his walking.

“Your love is truly wonderful,” said Balirossa. She was walking a little ways behind them, her cheeks slightly reddened. *I would like to be like that one day with my own splendid partner...* Balirossa imagined a knight on a white horse carrying her in his arms. *Yes... Just like that...*

In her mind, she went to embrace the knight, their eyes meeting as their faces grew close enough for her to see him clearly.

It was Gholl, the Dark One.

"Ah!" Balirossa cried out loudly before quickly covering her mouth with both hands. *Why?! Why would I imagine the Dark One of all people?!* She opened her eyes and was again caught off guard. Flio, who had been ahead of her, had gone off to investigate a small crowd that had been forming on the street.

"What's going on?" he asked, craning his neck as he approached.

"You son of a bitch...you think you can just walk away after plowing into us like that?!"

"It hurts! It hurts, bro!"

In the middle of the crowd was a rough-looking man. Next to him was a frail and slender man collapsed on the ground, lying on his side. In front of them was a figure that looked like a small woman, her whole body hidden by a dark cloak.

"I apologized for hitting your shoulder, didn't I?" She looked deeply frustrated, her voice full of anger.

The rough man screwed up his face and began to gesture wildly with his arms. "You think saying sorry is enough after how bad you hurt my bro?! His bones have gotta be broken! You think we'll forget it just like that? Let bygones be bygones? Huh?! The way I see it, you owe us somethin'!" He grabbed the woman's cloak near her chest with his left hand and held up his right in front of her. A crude smile was on his face.

The woman glared back, quietly clicking her tongue. "Extortionists. The lowest of the low. How fitting for an inferior life-form like yourself." She clenched her fists as she spoke, and an unnaturally dark shadow began to well up behind her.

"Wh-What is *that*?!" The man fearfully let go, taking two, then three steps back as black shadows continued to jet out from his mark.

Suddenly, Flio cut his way through the crowd, interrupting the commotion. "All right you two, that's quite enough."

"M-Master Flio!" The rough man, seeming to recognize Flio, quickly labored to put a pleasant smile on his face. These men had been pulling their con a month ago too, singling out the newcomer Flio as a target. It probably doesn't need to be said that he effortlessly saw through the scheme and delivered a nasty punishment for their trouble.

Flio sighed deeply at the rough man smiling performatively and rubbing his hands together in front of him. "Ataliera, didn't you promise me you would stop conning people? Khoui, you had better cut it out too."

Ataliera, the rough man, began to sweat furiously, still

maintaining his extremely false smile. "Oh, oh no," he said. "I'm not connin' no one! Never done a con in my life! H-Hey, Khoui! How long you gonna lie there? Get up!"

"Aww..." Khoui, the frail-looking man lying on the ground, stood up like nothing had happened, dusting sand off his body. "All right, I guess we'll take off..."

"Excuse me, Master Flio..." The two bowed again and again before taking off in the other direction, looking for all the world like they were fleeing.

Right, that takes care of that pair, but what about... Flio turned his attention away from the departing con artists and towards their mark, the woman. The black shadows that had surrounded her body a second ago had vanished.

"I suppose I should thank you," she said, giving Flio a shallow bow. "You have my gratitude."

Flio smiled back and returned her bow. "There's no need to thank me," he said. "I was just doing what anyone would. There's a few scumbags like that, but otherwise this city is full of good people. I hope this doesn't spoil your visit."

"I see," she said. "I'll try not to let it get to me."

Here Flio drew closer to whisper in the woman's ear. "You should be careful about using your demon powers where people can see. If the humans knew a demon was in their city, it might cause a panic." He patted her gently on the shoulder and walked away. Rys followed closely behind him.

The woman stood stock-still, staring after Flio as he left.



Rys pouted as Flio got back, folding her arms. "My lord, you drew far too close to that girl." It seemed she was angry that Flio had pressed so close to her ear.

"Sorry," he said, hugging his wife. "It won't happen again."

"Is that a promise?" Rys pressed close to Flio's chest and looked up at him with big puppy-dog eyes.

"Yes," he said, kissing Rys gently on the forehead. "I promise."

Balirossa was looking in the direction that Ataliera and Khoui fled in. "Ataliera and Khoui..." she muttered. "I could have handled the likes of them, my lord." She crossed her arms. But Flio and Rys both guffawed at once.

"Balirossa," said Flio, as Rys kept her lips closed tight in a futile attempt to suppress her sniggering laughter. "Didn't they trick you last time? I seem to remember you were about to give them every coin you had!"

Balirossa went bright red. "O-Oh! That... That was... I-I was just

worried I had hurt them! I just meant...they won't fool me again! Or something..." she stammered out an incoherent explanation as Flio and Rys struggled and failed to hide their laughter. "And that's... That's why, Lord Flio..."

"All right, all right, I get it," he said, gently patting Balirossa on the shoulder. "Let's hurry up and take care of business, and then let's get lunch." He continued on down the street. After a while, Balirossa jogged up after him, beet red.



After Flio finished selling his magic stones at the Hysui General Store, Rys and Balirossa joined him and together headed for Sucana Avenue. They then went into the newly opened restaurant on the corner to eat lunch. They finished their meal and set off down the city streets, chatting amiably.

"Thank you for treating us, Balirossa," said Rys.

Balirossa smiled and thumped her chest. "Think nothing of it! The food was delicious, and furthermore I got a chance to spend time with the two of you! I find myself quite satisfied."

"Then, shall we take the bill next time?" asked Flio, but Balirossa shook her head.

"Don't even think of it!" she objected. "Lady Rys prepares food for us every single day! The least I can do is—" Suddenly, she cut herself off. There was a woman blocking the path—the same woman Flio had saved earlier from Ataliera and Khoui.

"Do you have a moment?" she asked, taking a step towards Flio.

Flio smiled. "If it's about earlier, there's really no need for thanks," he said. "Like I said, I just did what anyone would."

"Well, I *am* grateful for your help..." she began. "But I actually have some questions for you." Her eyes were fixed on Flio as she spoke. "The truth is, I've been asked to look for someone. Have you ever heard of a man called 'Banaza' or his followers? I've heard rumors that someone using that name came to this town recently..." She paused. "Or rumors that *you* are Sir Banaza..."

It was plain to see that she was monitoring Flio and Rys closely for their reactions, but both of them gave her none. They continued to stand nonplussed on the spot, seeming perfectly unperturbed. "I'm afraid I don't know anything about him," said Rys. "May I ask what you want with this man?"

"I don't know how much I can tell you..." she said. "But basically I was asked to find him." She bowed lightly, not taking her eyes off of Flio and Rys. "I guess it's a little late for introductions, but my name is Greanyl. I'm gonna be staying at that inn just ahead for a few days. If you learn anything, I'd really appreciate your help."

“I see,” said Rys. “If I hear anything about this person, I will be sure to tell you.”

“Thanks...”

Flio, Rys and Balirossa all bowed, and Greanyl took her leave. Once she was completely out of sight, Balirossa, who had been hanging behind, ran up in front of them. “L-Lord Flio, what does this mean?” she said. “That woman asked for Banaza! Wasn’t that your former na—?” Flio quickly covered Balirossa’s mouth with his hand, silencing her. He put a cautioning finger to his own lips. Balirossa nodded, and Flio drew close to whisper.

“It doesn’t look like she has any ties to the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode,” he said quietly. “I think we had best be careful here.” Balirossa nodded.

“My lord,” said Rys, “would you like me to keep a discreet eye on her while she’s in the city?”

“Yes...” Flio muttered. “I had that thought too...”

The two spoke quietly, Flio’s hand still on Balirossa’s mouth. After conversing some more in this vein, the two left and headed back for their home.

◇Flio’s House—The Following Day◇

Balirossa was running her daily laps around Flio’s house. This was part of the training regimen she had set for herself: ten laps around the house every day.

“Another good day for running,” she said as she caught her breath. She looked up at the sky, enjoying the sensation of the outdoors and her exertion. Then, careful not to step out of the barrier, she got ready to return to running. “Hm?” In front of her, she could see a single woman walking down the road. “What’s a lone woman doing in a place like this?”

She left the barrier and started towards the girl who, she noticed, looked somewhat pained. “Excuse me!” she cried out. “Might I ask what you’re doing in a place like this?”

Suddenly, the woman vanished from Balirossa’s sight, and someone tackled her from behind, pinning her arms and forcing her to the ground. Craning her head to look over her shoulder, Balirossa saw that it was Greanyl. “S-Ser Greanyl!” she cried. “What treachery is this? Don’t think... Don’t think you’ll get away with...”

Greanyl’s words were cold. “What do you know about Banaza?” Balirossa’s eyes went wide, and Greanyl nodded, somehow satisfied. “I knew it. The others didn’t respond at all when I mentioned his name, but *you* did. Don’t think I didn’t notice you hiding behind the others.”

“You...” Still pinned to the ground, Balirossa stiffened her lips. “I don’t know! Do you hear me? I don’t know! I don’t know anything!”

She shut her eyes tight.

But Greanyl drew a short blade and held it against Balirossa's neck. "Be a good girl and cooperate," she said, "or I'll kill you."

"But I told you! I don't know! Killing me won't change that!"

"Stubborn one, aren't you..." Greanyl grabbed the back of Balirossa's head by the hair like a bird of prey. "Maybe a taste of pain will—"

"Aaall right, that's quite enough." Suddenly they were interrupted by a man's voice. At the same time, something struck Greanyl in the back of her neck. She fell unconscious. Flio had teleported behind them and struck her with the blade of his hand. Checking to make sure she was unconscious, he pulled her off of Balirossa. "You okay, Balirossa?"

"Lord Flio, I'm so sorry!" she said. "I was careless and caused you trouble..." She began to bow over and over again, not even bothering to wipe the dirt off her clothes.

Flio sighed with relief. "Don't worry about it. I'm just glad to see you're unharmed."

"Lord Flio..." She seemed truly moved by his concern.

Flio turned his attention to Greanyl, lying unconscious on the ground. He cast Analysis to take a look at her status. Most of it was hidden by concealment magics, but Flio could see through them easily. A window told him that she was a shadow demon. *She made it through the barrier around the city*, Flio mused. *She must be quite something.*



Before long, Greanyl opened her eyes. "Nnh..." she mumbled. Then she realized that her hands were tied behind her back. "Ahh, crap!" She struggled for all she was worth, trying to rip the ropes apart with brute strength.

"There's no use in struggling like that," said Flio. "Those ropes are made with the highest level of magic. You won't be able to burst out of them with your level of power."

Greanyl plopped down and let out a "crap." She was in Flio's living room. It seemed they had laid her out on the sofa. She sat up and crossed her legs as she took stock of her situation. Surrounding her were Flio, Rys, Balirossa, Blossom, Byleri, and Belano. She had been captured. "I see," she said, closing her eyes. "So there's no way to escape. I won't shame myself by kicking and screaming. Do what you will."

A wry smile came over Flio's face. "I wasn't exactly planning on holding you captive or anything," he said. "It's just, after you suddenly attacked Balirossa like that, I was worried you might be

violent when you woke up.” He extended his arm towards Greanyl, and a magic circle appeared in front of his hand. The ropes binding Greanyl suddenly vanished.

Greanyl held her hands in front of her face, astonished to have been given her freedom as Flio continued on. “Would you mind telling us what’s going on? I might be able to help you,” he said.

Greanyl just glared at him. “I refuse,” she said adamantly. “Just kill me. A shadow dies without leaving a corpse.” She huffed and turned the other way. And then, suddenly, Hiya appeared next to her. For a while Hiya just stared at her, and then they pressed their finger against Greanyl’s forehead.

“You...” said Greanyl. “What are you—”

“Was it not you yourself who told us to do what we will?” said Hiya. Greanyl was at a loss for words in the face of Hiya’s impeccable logic. Meanwhile, their finger still against the shadow demon’s forehead, Hiya stared deep into Greanyl’s eyes.

“Are you trying to read my mind...?” She asked, smirking fiendishly. “You won’t be able to.”

“Indeed, that seems to be the case. Your Concealment skill is very advanced. Even I, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, cannot see clearly into your mind.” Hiya crossed their arms in thought.

Flio spoke up. “So all we need to do is disable her skill?” he extended his hand, and once more a magic circle appeared.

“That is true, Exalted One,” Hiya began. “However, her skill is quite powerful. Even you could not—” *CLINK!* Hiya’s words were drowned out by the harsh sound of magic being neutralized. Hiya almost jumped in surprise. “What? Impossible... Already?!”

“*What?!*” Greanyl looked aghast. “N-No way! You broke my skill?!”

Flio’s lips curled into a cunning smile. “That *was* pretty tough,” he said. “I had a bit of trouble breaking that one.”

Hiya’s smile was cold. “Exalted One,” they said, “you say it gave you trouble...but I only recall two seconds passing after your magic circle appeared.”



“Fine, I’ll speak. I’ll tell you.” With her Concealment skill broken, Greanyl seemed utterly resigned. With a bitter voice, she began. “My name is Greanyl. I’m one of the Silent Listeners—a spy for the Dark Army.”

“I see,” said Rys. “Then you’re one of Uliminas’s subordinates?”

“Yes, exactly. The Silent Listeners answer directly to Lady Ulimi—wait, how do you know that?!” She gasped. “The Silent Listeners’ very

existence is top secret, even in the Dark Army!”

“Oh, I was once with the Dark Army, for a time. But please, do go on.”

“Wha— You were with the Dark Army?!”

“Oh don’t mind me. Just continue your story, please!”

“O-Okay...” Greanyl didn’t seem at all satisfied, but she continued as Rys urged. “My orders from the Dark One Gholl himself were to find the man known as Banaza, then to capture and bring them before the Dark One I’ve traveled all over on this mission, trying to get information...” She sighed deeply.

Across from her, Flio and Hiya both looked shocked. “Hiya,” said Flio, “what do you make of this?”

“It’s peculiar, O Exalted One, no matter how I look at it.”

Greanyl watched Flio and Hiya whisper to each other, confused. “Hm?” she asked. “What’s up?”

“Miss Greanyl,” said Flio, hesitating. “Just to confirm, your orders were to capture the man called Banaza and bring him to the Dark One Gholl?”

“Yes, exactly.” She answered Flio’s baffled question without hesitation. Once again, Flio turned to face Hiya, and the two of them both tilted their heads in mirrored puzzlement. They started whispering again for a while, and then they turned back to the shadow demon.

“All right,” said Flio. “How about this, Miss Greanyl? We’ll let you go this time, and you’ll go straight to the Dark Citadel to confirm your orders with Uliminas. Is that acceptable?”

“Wait, hold on!” Greanyl started to her feet. “Wh-What’s the meaning of this? You captured me, even forced me to reveal my mission! After all that, you want me to believe you’re taking pity on me?” She scoffed. “Just kill me! Do it now! If you won’t, I’ll do it myself!”

Flio grabbed Greanyl’s shoulders, holding them firmly. This wasn’t his ordinary gentle embrace—he was pushing her down with force. With Flio’s unbelievable strength bearing down on her body, Greanyl was forced back onto the couch. Flio fixed her with a steady gaze. “Are our terms acceptable?”

Before Flio’s domineering aura, Greanyl could only mutely nod her head. It didn’t seem that refusing was an option.



Rys gave Flio a strange look after Greanyl had left. “My love, why did you tell Greanyl to confirm her mission with Uliminas?”

Flio and Hiya shared a knowing smirk. “We had a look at her mission in her mind after breaking through her defenses,” said Flio,

smiling wryly.

“Yes,” said Hiya. They knit their brows. “It seems that our spy has made a mistake.”

“What?” Rys’s eyes opened in surprise.

◇ Silent Listeners HQ, the Dark Citadel—Several Days Later ◇

“Meowt did mew just say?!” Greanyl had just returned, and had asked a question that startled Uliminas.

“Yes, ma’am,” she said. “I was just wondering...if I could double-check my orders from you?” She looked somehow dubious.

“And I’m telling you to repeat your meowrders.”

“Yes, ma’am! I believe they were: ‘Find the man known as Banaza. The Dark One desires his arrest. Bring him to the Dark Citadel.’” Orders for the Silent Listeners were handed down to them in the form of encoded letters. When an agent had memorized its contents, they were to burn it to remove any proof that an order had been given.

“Um, Greanyl?” Uliminas sounded disappointed.

“Yes, Lady Uliminas?”

“Did mew actually *read* your meowrders?”

“Yes! Very carefully!”

Uliminas held up a slip of paper and handed it over to her subordinate. “Here. These are your meowrders. Please look them over again.” As Greanyl looked it over, she very obviously began to sweat with nerves. “Greanyl...what does it say?”

“Oh, um, well...”

“Read it purroperly!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am! ‘Find Flio, the man formerly known as Banaza. The Dark One desires his address. Bring word of him to the Dark Citadel.’” She gave a stiff smile as she finished reading.

Uliminas was glaring at her, her fur standing on end. “*Arrest?*” She was trembling with barely suppressed anger. “*Bring him?!*” Greanyl’s cold sweat was like a waterfall. “Mew’re always jumping to conclusions. And meow many times have I told mew to be *careful* with your meowrders? Huh?!” Uliminas stepped towards Greanyl, her sharp claws at the ready.

“F-Forgive me! Forgive meee!” Greanyl sunk to the floor and prostrated herself before the vengeful hellcat.

“Mewseless idiot!” she cried. “At least tell me mew remember your *other* meowrder.” Uliminas was making no effort at all to hide her rage.

“My...other order?” Greanyl slowly looked up, tilting her head in confusion. It really seemed like she had no recollection at all. “Um, Lady Uliminas... Was there something else I was supposed to do?”

“*Meooooow!*” Uliminas brought her razor-sharp claws, harder than

steel, to bear against her. Before long, the Dark Citadel was filled with the sound of Greanyl's screams.

◇Flio's House—Days Later◇

On her second visit to Flio's house, Greanyl was the very picture of contrition. "It was entirely my error." She bowed her head over and over as she spoke. "I seem to have remembered my orders wrong..." Uliminas had been terribly angry with her. Even now her hair was shredded messily and her body was covered in painful scars.

Flio regarded her with an unreadable expression. *She's serious and diligent, this Greanyl*, he thought. *But I think she's a little too hasty for her own good.* He extended his hand to cast magic, and Greanyl's hair and body were both instantly healed. Greanyl herself, however, was too busy apologizing to notice. Her head was almost fixed to the floor.

"If you hadn't told me to confirm my orders with Lady Uliminas, I would have made a terrible mistake..." She actually pressed her head to the ground at this.

Balirossa, who had been watching, held Greanyl by her armpits and pulled her to her feet. "You've apologized enough, I think," she said. "Everyone makes mistakes, you know."

"I've been terribly discourteous to you especially. Will you forgive me?"

"I'm not upset in the slightest. Shall we let bygones be, Ser Greanyl?"

"Thank you so much..." Now on her feet, Greanyl bowed again. Her eyes were flooded with tears. Balirossa gently patted her on the shoulder.



Flio sat Greanyl down on the sofa and waited for her to calm down. When she was ready, they gathered together everyone in the house to tell them what had happened. Although Greanyl was a Silent Listener, a spy working for Uliminas...

"I've been taken off of any important missions for some time, because of my habit of rushing ahead," she explained, mortified. However, every single Silent Listener had been dispatched to the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode on this search mission, Greanyl included. "It had been so long since I'd been given a mission... I think I was too focused on earning some merit that I got sloppy. I'm really sorry." Greanyl sighed deeply.

She left soon after, saying that she wanted to do some more investigations in the area of Houghtow. A thin smile came to Flio's face as he watched her leave. Greanyl had only just confirmed with

Uliminas that the man they were searching for was “Flio, the man formerly known as Banaza,” but it seemed that she had somehow failed to realize that this Flio was *the* Flio mentioned in her orders. She had left without ever bringing it up. “I think she was so fixated on apologizing that she hasn’t arrived there yet,” Flio said.

Rys snickered out loud. “Well, she is a Silent Listener,” she said. “Eventually she’ll figure it out.”

“Perhaps.” Flio nodded.

Balirossa was standing behind them. It looked like she had a number of conflicting feelings about Greanyl. “But I feel a tiny bit sorry for her, not knowing...” she said. After comforting her earlier, Balirossa had become somewhat fond of the shadow demon.

Blossom poked Balirossa in the side. “You get it, right, Balirossa? If she finds out about Lord Flio, she’s gonna tell the Dark One where we are.”

Byleri looked up at the ceiling, her index finger resting on her cheek. “Will it, like, be like the old place? Is Mister Gholl the Dark One gonna pretend to be a human and come hang out again?”

“He’s after Balirossa,” added Belano, looking straight at her. “For sure.”

“Wh-Whaaat?!” Balirossa, at a loss for words beyond that, grabbed her head in her hands. Her eyelids twitched. Her mouth flapped open and closed like a fish. Droplets of cold sweat trickled down her forehead.

Blossom and the rest closed in all around her. “He’s really fond of our Balirossa, that Dark One, huh!”

“Yeah, but that’s good, right?” said Byleri. “You should, like, totally go for it! It’ll be like, the Dark One getting along with humans, y’know?”

Belano gave a rather intense thumbs up, but said nothing.

It took some time for the words to sink into Balirossa’s head, but when they did, she collapsed on the floor. Sybe came snuffling up to her in its unicorn rabbit form and poked at her repeatedly. It seemed to be trying to offer some kind of comfort.

Flio’s smile was strained as he regarded the scene. “They’ll find out at some point,” he said. “Well, we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

“Hrm...” The Dark One Gholl sat reading official documents on his throne. To his side stood Uliminas, waiting. Gholl raised his head and looked over at her. “So we still do not know the cause of the strange fluctuation I felt in the west of Klyrode?”

“R-Right,” she said, bowing deeply. “It seems my agents have

made a number of...*mewstakes*. I apologize purrfusely.” The fluctuation had in fact been caused by Damalynas’s appearance in Houghtow and her subsequent battle with Hiya some months back. Naturally, neither the Dark One Gholl nor Uliminas knew anything about that, but Gholl could clearly sense the powerful energy even as far away as his throne. Thinking it best not to overlook, he ordered Uliminas to discover what had happened.

“I told Greanyl to look into that,” she muttered under her breath, “but that idiot went and *forgot* her meowrders... *Purrfectly* hopeless, that girl...” She could still clearly remember losing herself and savaging Greanyl.

Gholl stared at Uliminas, wondering about her behavior. “Well,” he said at last, “that’s that, then. But I cannot leave things as they are...”

The Dark One slowly rose from his throne.

◇Houghtow City, Days Later◇

“Thank you, Master Flio! I look forward to your next visit!”

“Of course, Mister Elcion. Thank you for doing business.”

Flio exchanged some light pleasantries with the shopkeeper Elcion as he took the bag containing his payment for the dragonscale gear he had made himself. When he left, Rys was standing by the entrance, waiting for him. She ran up as soon as she noticed him leaving the shop. “Hello, my love,” she said. “I trust it went well?”

“It did. Sorry to keep you waiting, Rys.”

“Is your work finished for the day?”

“Yes, this is the last of the sales talks I had planned. We should be good!”

Rys smiled happily at her husband’s words, and took hold of his arm, pressing close.

“Then shall we do lunch? Where would you like to go today?”

Flio glanced around the area. As he did, he used the spell Search. He was looking for Balirossa and Byleri, who had accompanied them into town today. “It looks like Balirossa and Byleri are still shopping. We should see if they have any input since we brought them along and all.”

“Yes, I suppose,” said Rys. “Then, my husband, shall we rest together on that bench over there?”

“All right, let’s do that.” The pair began towards a bench in the shade of a nearby tree, when suddenly Flio stopped. “Hm?”

“What’s the matter, my lord?” Rys looked up at Flio, puzzled. But Flio just pressed his index finger against his forehead, absorbed in the display of his Search spell inside his brain. He could see a three-dimensional map of the entire city of Houghtow, and all its many

shops. Ordinary people were displayed in blue, with Flio's companions displayed in green. However, there was one person on the map who appeared in a third color.

Purple... A demon.

Flio's first thought was that it must be Greanyl. But when he looked, he found that Greanyl was in an entirely different part of the map. *So who would this demon be?* Flio tilted his head in curiosity as he continued to look through the map. The demon was headed straight for his position.

As he looked, Hiya appeared behind him. "Exalted One, you must stay back. I can sense the presence of a demon of considerable power coming towards you." As they spoke, they stepped in front of Flio and Rys, holding their right arm out to cover the two. An enormous magic circle appeared around their feet as they prepared their maximum firepower to cast a spell.

"Hiya, wait just a moment." Rys stared ahead, squinting her eyes. "My lord, is that...?" Whoever it was she saw, they brought a wry smile to her face.

"Ah," said Flio, looking in the direction Rys was squinting. "I was wondering who that was." It looked like he recognized the demon. Like Rys, he began to smirk.

A demon-like man was walking towards them, looking restlessly around at his surroundings. He seemed to notice the spell Hiya was casting, and began to gather a great amount of magic in his right hand. But then he saw Flio and Rys and smiled happily. "Well, if it isn't Mister Flio!"

Flio smiled back. "Mister Ghozal," he said. "It's been too long!"

The demon—the Dark One Gholl, in his disguise as the human man Ghozal—strode up to Flio and took his hand firmly in his own. Gholl had come here to investigate the source of the mysterious energy fluctuation he had felt. Strictly speaking, this wasn't the kind of work the Dark One should take on personally, but between the thus-far fruitless search for Flio, the stalemate with the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, and unrest within the ranks of the Dark Army, he had built up a considerable deal of stress. He had come here as much for the sake of relaxation as for the search itself. Naturally enough, Uliminas had been strongly opposed to this, but in the end Gholl had insisted rather forcefully.

Overjoyed at meeting Flio right on arriving in Houghtow, Gholl grinned happily and shook Flio's hand with considerable vigor. "I can't believe it! I never expected to meet again in a place like this."

"It's good to see you looking so well, Ghozal!" The two looked joyful and greeted each other as old friends.

Hiya's mouth was agape. "Of course," they said. "I should have

expected the Exalted One and the Dark One to be on good terms. But, my! I thought my admiration could grow no further!" They bowed deeply to Flio.

Rys chuckled. "Yes, that's right," she said. "I suppose Hiya did join us *after* the move. They don't know about Ghozal."

Ghozal, for his part, was glancing at Hiya out of the corner of his eye. *Hiya, was it? The magic circle they cast was incredible. I suppose Flio has continued to recruit people like them. This is the man who tamed Rys, after all...*



Flio and Ghozal had been enjoying a friendly chat when Balirossa appeared from a side road, carrying the fruits of today's shopping trip. "My apologies for the delay!" she said. "I have finished my shopping." She hadn't yet noticed that the man chatting with Flio was Ghozal.

The Dark One looked up sharply. "That voice! Ser Balirossa?!"

Balirossa froze in place, her happy smile unnaturally still. It was a while before she opened her mouth. "Ah? M-Mister Ghozal? Wh-Wh-What brings you here?" Her body was shaking despite her stiffness.

Balirossa was of course fully aware that Ghozal was in fact the Dark One Gholl. She was also aware that he had been quite determined to meet her. In her mind she thought this was because he was seeking revenge for having pointed a sword at him on their first meeting. The truth was that the Dark One had been captivated by her dignified bearing and chivalric conduct. Gholl thought that by forging a friendship with Flio, he might be able to start a romantic relationship with Balirossa, but it seemed that Balirossa still had no idea.

Ghozal watched Balirossa shake, and then he gasped with emotion. *I see... She makes it look like she's shaking, but that is actually a precise fighting stance. In actuality, she is prepared for any kind of attack. Incredible, Ser Balirossa...*

Balirossa was really only just shaking, but Ghozal continued to stare in confused admiration.

"Hi hi," said Byleri, walking up to them with a smile. "Like, sorry for the holdup?"

"Are you done with your business in town, Byleri?" asked Flio.

"Yeah!" she said. "There's a really good bookseller in town, y'know?"

"Books!" exclaimed Flio. "What kind of book did you get?"

"Oh..." Byleri said, blushing slightly for some reason as she hid her bag behind her. "L-Like, y'know? But uhh, how come Ghozal's here?"

"Ah, we just had a chance encounter..." Flio explained what had

happened to Byleri as she nodded her head, relieved that the topic had shifted away from her book. “And that’s how he found me!” Flio finished and turned back to Ghozal. “Hey Ghozal,” he said, “since we ran into each other, would you like to come back with us to my place and have some tea?”

“Hrm.” Ghozal nodded. “I would like that. Just like old times.”

“Hweh?!” Balirossa made an indescribable noise and once more froze on the spot. This was all very much contrary to her desires for this encounter.

“Everyone’s back together, so shall we get going?” Flio began to walk, with Rys, Hiya, Byleri, and Ghozal following. Balirossa was left behind, clutching her head. Then, suddenly it seemed like she had some sort of idea.

“Ah, huh? Oh, w-wait for me!” Balirossa dashed after the group.

◇Klyrode Castle—Throne Room◇

“No...” The Princess crumbled at the report, sliding off her throne to land on her knees and pressing both of her hands against her forehead. “That can’t be...”

All of the near disasters that had transpired since she had taken up her role as regent: The incident with the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness. The incident with the Grand Magus of Midnight. The fight against the Dark Army’s small-scale guerrilla attacks. All of those had been dealt with by one man—Flio. The Princess was determined to make Flio the Hero for his contributions to the Kingdom of Klyrode. She had asked all of her aides and subordinates to help her find some way to achieve this.

And then, a mage came to report to her, his face blue. Some time ago, he said, a person by the name of Banaza had been summoned as a hero candidate. At the time, he had been deemed utterly lacking the blessing of the Celestial Plane and unfit to be Hero. However, there was a terrible mistake on the part of Klyrode and Banaza was not returned to his own world. In an attempt to engineer Banaza’s death, King Klyrode had sent him into exile near a forest inhabited by fearsome monsters along with a magic item bearing a monster-attracting curse.

“I knew that man was sent to the Delaveza Forest, but I had no idea my father had gone so far,” said the Princess, downcast. “How did you learn this?”

“You recall, Your Highness, that a part of the city was destroyed by Damalynas, the Grand Magus of Midnight. At the time, Lord Flio provided much of the funds used to finance the city’s repair.” He paused. “Among them we found many of the same coins that were given to Banaza.”

The Princess covered her face with her hands. “A monster-attracting curse...” she said. “Lord Flio would have seen through it easily. And of course he would understand what it meant. Of *course* he doesn’t want to be our Hero. We treated him so badly...”

The Princess shook her head, still holding her hands to her face. She felt like she finally understood why Flio had so adamantly refused to accept the title of Hero. “But...” she started. “But we must apologize to him! Perhaps he will yet forgive us!” She shot to her feet. “I will depart for the city of Houghtow at once! Summon everyone in the castle who can cast Teleport!”

“Yes, Your Highness! Straightaway!” The people who had gathered in the throne room dashed off.

“Lord Flio, I will see you soon,” she muttered quietly to herself, clasping her hands together in prayer. “Please, find it in your heart to listen...”

◇Meanwhile, in Flio’s House◇

“Hm?” Ghozal had just taken his leave when Flio made a curious noise.

“What is it, my lord?”

“Oh, nothing. Nothing important, anyway. I just have a feeling we’ll be having more guests soon.”

“A feeling?” said Rys, just a little surprised by her husband’s words.

Chapter 3: The Coup

◇A Room in the Dark Citadel◇

Yuigarde, the so-called Tyrant of the Dark Family, raged through his room, kicking the walls and screaming. “What in the *hells* is wrong with my brother?! Is he going senile?!” Yuigarde’s half-brother was none other than the Dark One Gholl.

“Master Yuigarde, this is the Dark Citadel... We do not know if one of Uliminas’s spies is listening, so if you could please be a little more quiet...?” A succubus stepped towards Yuigarde to try to stop him, reaching out with her arms. This was Phufun, Yuigarde’s henchwoman.

However, Yuigarde fended her off. “Am I supposed to put up with this? Leaving the castle whenever he feels like! Talking about bringing a *human* into the Dark Army! What is he *thinking*?!” He stomped ferociously through his room.

“From what I’ve learned snooping around Uliminas, that *human* has all the power you would expect of a Hero. The Dark One Gholl must consider it a stroke of fortune that Klyrode has not claimed him. I believe he thinks that it would be profitable for us if he were to recruit the man.”

Yuigarde roared with rage. “Yeah, because he’s going *senile*!” He kicked the wall again, hard enough to blast a gaping hole in it with his foot. “If he’s a Hero, destroy him! If he isn’t, destroy him even harder! *Why* would you try to get along with his kind?! The only good human is a dead one! We should be attacking Klyrode! Why are we being so damned *cautious*?! Take the *whole army* and *crush them under heel*! Am I wrong?!”

“You are not, Master.” Phufun bowed deeply. “Not in the slightest.”

Yuigarde nodded his head once, satisfied. “Has it come to this, then? Do I take my brother’s throne for my own? Declare myself the true Dark One and launch a full invasion of the human heartland of Klyrode?” He clenched both his fists tightly as he spoke.

“I would caution against haste, Master,” said Phufun. “You know the Dark One Gholl is frightfully strong. With your power you could perhaps defeat him, but you would certainly be hard-pressed. And what if you find resistance among the Dark Army? Now, on that note...” She leaned in to whisper something in her master’s ear—

something that made a sinister grin spread over his face.

“Hrm, I see!” he said. “I will leave the preparations in your hands, then. Do not disappoint me!”

“I will not, Master Yuigarde.” Phufun bowed and teleported off to do her dark deeds, leaving Yuigarde alone in the room, laughing maniacally.

◇In a Forest◇

Hero Gold-Hair breathed a sigh of relief as he surveyed the area through a part in the thick grass. “It seems like those guards finally gave up,” he said. “Persistent lot. What in the blazes did I ever do to *them*?” Wiping the grass and mud off his body, he began to walk through the forest.

Behind him, Tsuya scrambled out of her hiding place. “Oh, um, Hero Gold-Haaair!” she cried. She was visibly struggling for breath. “Can we please take a break? Even a little one would be nice...” She looked up pitifully at her companion, begging him with her eyes. Tsuya was wearing a full cloak, but underneath had on surprisingly little. When Hero Gold-Hair looked down to face her, he caught an eyeful of her ample cleavage.

“A-All right, find somewhere to sit and take a rest. I’ll... I’ll guard the area!”

“Thank you so muuuch!”

Hero Gold-Hair watched Tsuya rest from the corner of his eye, fumbling awkwardly. *Honestly...her body is just obscene, no matter how many times I look at it...* He turned his eyes upwards, to the sky. *But she’s stuck by my side all this time. I should do my best to treat her a little like a maiden. I’m a hero, after all!*

Suddenly, before their eyes, a different woman appeared. She must have used Teleportation. Whoever she was, she was wearing some *extremely* provocative clothing. It wouldn’t have been out of place in a bondage kink scene. The woman used her index finger to press her glasses up against the bridge of her nose in a deliberate flourish.

Hero Gold-Hair drew his sword and faced her. “And *you* are? You don’t look like someone from the castle.” Tsuya cowered behind him.

“Oh no, oh no!” Tsuya said. “She looks scaaary!” She pressed close to Hero Gold-Hair’s back—maybe a little too close. He could feel two plump mounds pressing against him.

“Y-Yeah!” he sputtered. “Yeah, she is! S-So, would you stand back a little?!”

“What? But she’s scaaary!”

“Well, I’ll protect you!”

Before they could end up in a protracted quarrel, the woman once again adjusted her glasses with the same level of grandiosity as before. "You are very laid back, you humans. Perhaps you don't realize your situation," she said. "I am Phufun, servant of my Master Yuigarde." At her feet appeared an array of black spiders. "I have chosen you as sacrifices so that my master may ascend to the rank of Dark One. It is a great honor for pathetic creatures like yourself. You will serve to bring about the greatest Dark One in history!" Her smile was cold.

"Eeeeeek!" Tsuya hid behind Hero Gold-Hair's back and trembled. But he was ultimately unimpressed.

"Hmph," he grumbled. "Pathetic."

"What?"

"I don't know who you are or what's going on, but this Yuigarde fellow is so weak and cowardly that he needs *sacrifices* to become a strong Dark One? Pathetic!" He brought his sword to a high guard as he spoke. "I'll show you what *I* can do with my *own* strength!"

"Oh, but Hero Gold-Haaair," said Tsuya, pressing her index finger to her cheek in thought even as she clung to his back, "I'm pretty sure the gods of the Celestial Plane gave you their blessing when you came —"

Hero Gold-Hair glanced over his shoulder, glaring at Tsuya. "That's entirely different!" he shouted.

"Oh, it iiis? My bad..." Tsuya withered under Gold-Hair's sharp glare and slumped her shoulders.

With that said and done, Gold-Hair turned his attention back to Phufun, clearing his throat very deliberately. "A-Ahem! Well, regardless! I have no intention of falling to the underling of such a coward!" Once more he readied his blade.

Phufun seemed colossally bored. "Well, say what you like, you human coward." She gestured towards him with her right hand as her black spiders unleashed a torrent of webbing.

"Hmph. I'll show you the true power of Hero Gold-Hair!"

◇Minutes Later◇

Phufun looked down at Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya, all wrapped up in spider silk. "You had some half-impressive things to say," she said, "but in the end you're just a human. Hardly worth mentioning." She snapped her fingers and an endless horde of spiders came to collect the two bound humans. She extended her right hand to conjure a magic circle. Phufun, her spiders, and the two they had claimed vanished as quickly as they had come. The forest was once again quiet.

◇A Restaurant in Houghtow◇

“Oh? You’re interested in that sort of martial arts too, Ser Balirossa?” Ghozal sat across from Balirossa at a restaurant in town, nodding along with interest as he sipped his drink.

“Y-Yes, I suppose,” said Balirossa. “Though, really, it’s just how I like to spend my time...” She was dedicating every ounce of willpower she had to acting natural and calm, but it was proving difficult. She knew Ghozal to be the Dark One, of course, and even now she suspected that he was after her life. Her hands were shaking, making her glass rattle loudly.

Ghozal was watching her shaking cup, enraptured. *Even at a time like this her arm is loose, ready to draw her sword at any moment... She truly is something!* He kept nodding, thoroughly taken in by his misunderstanding.

Flio, who was sitting next to Balirossa, looked between her and Gholl, smiling. “There’s a lot she still needs to work on,” he said, “but she’s an incredibly dedicated student.”

After their chance reunion in Houghtow, Gholl had returned to his old habit of visiting Flio’s house whenever he had a chance, just like everyone had thought he would. He would make friendly conversation with Flio, while also keeping an eye out for Balirossa. Balirossa, however, was doing everything she could to avoid him. He hardly ever had a chance to see her face. Finally fed up with watching this two-person farce, Flio had arranged for today’s luncheon.

“Balirossa, why don’t you try talking with Ghozal once without running away? If you don’t want to talk anymore after that, just tell him.”

“B-But...if I say such a thing, the Dark One will surely k-k-kill—”

“Mister Ghozal isn’t that kind of man—or demon, rather. And besides, I’ll be right there with you.”

It took a lot of convincing, but Balirossa finally agreed to come. Ghozal was overjoyed with Flio’s plan, while Balirossa was terrified.

“The contrast between those two is incredible,” said Rys, smirking as she watched the conversation unfold with Byleri from a table next to theirs.

“Ah ha ha, yeah? Like, totally...”

Rys had once been in the Dark Army and was very well acquainted with the Dark One Gholl. To her, the idea that he would be so smitten with a human woman, or that he could look so cheerful in conversation, had once been beyond her wildest dreams. All she could do was grin. She was barely able to suppress her laughter.

Rys’s amusement aside, Ghozal was gazing at Balirossa with a big smile on his face. Balirossa felt like she could collapse at any moment.

Oh no... At this rate, the conversation's going to peter out, and we'll be left just staring at each other! Working up her courage, she raised her head. "Um...Sir Ghozal," she said, exerting her willpower to speak, "I have something I want to talk to you ab—"

"I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation!" Suddenly, Greanyl burst into the restaurant and ran up to their table. "Lord Gho!! There's—"

"It's Ghozal!"

"Oh! I'm so terribly sorry! Lord Ghozal, Lady Uliminas asked me to report to you... There's an emergency!"

"What? What happened?!"

Greanyl leaned forward, using concealment magic to ensure nobody could overhear as she whispered in Ghozal's ear. "Lord Yuigarde has launched a rebellion against you. He's occupied the throne room, calling himself the true Dark One."

Ghozal's eyebrow twitched at the news. "Yuigarde did *what*?!" He took to his feet. "Ser Balirossa, I'm terribly sorry to leave in the middle of our conversation, but some urgent business just came up. We'll have to pick up some other day." He took her hand in his and lightly kissed it like a gentleman.

Balirossa's cheeks flushed red. She had absolutely not been expecting that. "Oh!" she said. "I, um..." But Ghozal stood up straight and tall, and followed Greanyl out of the restaurant. Balirossa was left watching him go.

"He seemed like he was in a hurry..." mused Flio, curious as he watched Ghozal leave. "I wonder what happened."

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

Yuigarde called out loudly as he entered the throne room. "Well, Phufun? Do you have it ready?"

Phufun stepped out from behind the throne. She faced Yuigarde and bowed deeply. "Good and ready, Master," she said. Yuigarde stepped forward, beside her. Before them, hidden by the throne, was an enormous, elaborate, and thoroughly evil-looking magic circle.

"This is for the Rite of Superhybridization?"

"Yes, Master. This is the secret magic art, known to very few."

Beyond the bounds of the world, deep in the abyss, was an alternate dimension known as the Dark World. The Rite of Superhybridization was dark magic that drew profane energy from that realm to empower its user far beyond their normal abilities. This magic was related to the Rite of Hybridization that Damalynas the Grand Magus of Midnight once used, but much stronger. Unlike its lesser counterpart, however, Superhybridization required a sacrifice.

Yuigarde regarded the circle. “But it’s not gonna empower me for long, is it.”

“That is why we must have everything ready *first*, Master,” said Phufun. “When you and Gholl begin your duel, we can cast the spell simply by offering up our sacrifice. That way you can get the best possible use out of it. All you need to do, my lord, is defeat Gholl before the spell runs out.”

“Hrm. Planned to perfection. I like it!” Yuigarde grinned, confident in his victory. “With my own hands, I will defeat my brother—no, I will defeat *Gholl*, and take my rightful throne!” He raised his right hand in the air and laughed and laughed. The sight seemed to strike Phufun with emotion. She bowed deeply, her shoulders trembling in awe.

Behind Phufun, the sacrifices her spiders had brought—Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya—lay on the floor, wrapped up tight. Hero Gold-Hair was struggling as hard as he could. “Release me! This is not where I am meant to die!” he tried to say, but it came out as, “Mmph! Mmmmmph!” With the black spider web binding him, he couldn’t even speak. Next to him, Tsuya lay unconscious.

Between Yuigarde’s bellowing laugh and Hero Gold-Hair’s muffled screams, a strange symphony of voices filled the throne room.

◇Dark Citadel—Infernal Four’s Meeting Room◇

The Infernal Four under Gholl, the current Dark One, had gathered together for a meeting: the lamia Yorminyt, the lichsteed Sleip, and the doppeladler Hugi-Mugi. Once, the lupine Fengaryl had been with them, but he had been accidentally killed when Flio used the spell Purification. His empty seat had yet to be filled, leaving the Infernal Four standing at only three.

Sleip, the oldest of the group, stroked his white beard as he thought aloud. “Should we really be taking Phufun up on this?” he wondered. He seemed to be quite agitated. The horse part of his body—the part below his waist—kept restlessly kicking at the ground.

Next to him, Yorminyt’s serpent-like lower half was equally restless as her human upper body sighed. “You mean,” she said, “to sssimply watch and not meddle as Yuigarde challengesss the Dark One for hisss throne. But good or ill, we have already accepted her termsss, have we not?”

“Yes...” said Sleip. “Indeed we have. Although we would be within our rights to throw Yuigarde in the dungeon...”

Yorminyt held up a finger to Sleip’s mouth, interrupting him before he could continue. “We are doing thiss to wake Lord Gholl out of his sstupor, no? That iss why we, the Infernal Four, have taken up

Phufun's offer, no?"

"Exactly, yes! Yes, exactly!" Both of Hugi-Mugi's hawk heads spoke in tandem. "The Dark One has been acting odd lately, yes! Yes, oddly acting!" Their golden wings fluttered in excitement. "Hardly in the Dark Citadel, never attacking humans, and now going to visit a human man, yes? Yes, very odd!"

Sleip and Yorminyt nodded emphatically in agreement. "The Dark One hasss not been taking this seriousssly," said Yorminyt.

"The old Dark One would simply suppress a rebellion by force," said Sleip.

"Well, I wouldn't expect Yuigarde to get the better of Lord Gholl. When he receivesss a challenge for a Ritual Duel, I'm ssure he will come to his sensesss."

"Indeed. The Dark One is wise. When he understands that this is the consequence of his behavior, he is certain to repent."

"Yuigarde will fail, yes! Yes, he will fail! We want Lord Gholl back to normal, yes!"

The three seemed to be in agreement.

"This is all for the sake of our lord, the Dark One..."

"Yesss, it isss all for him."

"Yes, yes!"



Sleip, Yorminyt, and Hugi-Mugi conveyed their thoughts on the matter to the council of advisors to the Dark One. They explained that they were not hoping to eliminate Gholl, but only bring him to his senses. The advisors had also been unnerved by the Dark One's recent behavior and all agreed with the Infernals that something had to be done and that they would not interfere.

All of them, except for one.

"*Meowt* are you *saying*?!" Uliminas interrupted Yorminyt's speech, springing to her feet in full-on battle mode. "*Never!* Do you think I'm a *mewdiot*?!"

"U-Uliminasss, we jussst thought..."

"You can *think*," she said, "after you *arrest him!* This is *mewtiny!* And mew! The Infernal Four!"

"No, no, Uliminasss," said Yorminyt. "Memberssss of the Dark Family have the right to call a Ritual Duel if they cannot follow the current Dark One. It'sss technically a *rebellion*, not a *mutiny*..."

"Mew cares?!" Uliminas grit her jaw shut and bolted straight for the throne room.

The golems and gargoyles guarding the gates saw Uliminas coming with clear violent intent and judged her to be an enemy. At

once, they started to move. The hellcat busted through handily, though not without taking damage, and leapt into the throne room. Before her sat Yuigarde.

“Yuigarde!” she cried, “You’re under arrest! *Meeeoowww!*” Her claws out, she sailed through the air, arms and legs extended out as far as she could reach. She aimed a flying kick at Yuigarde’s head, planning to contract her limbs when she struck to rake Yuigarde’s whole upper body with the claws on her feet and hands.

“Your aim is good...” Yuigarde remained sitting, not even rising to receive her attack. “But you lack follow-through!” *Crack!* A terrible sound echoed through the room as Uliminas’s claws shattered into pieces on impact, shards flying in every direction. “I can harden my body at will, you know. Although I guess you’ve figured that out.” He clenched his right hand into a fist, grinning maniacally. “Now, begone!”

Just as Uliminas landed, Yuigarde shouted and struck her with his fist. She was sent flying, her body colliding with the wall hard enough to cause it to crumble. The hellcat found herself pinned under the rubble. Yuigarde simply huffed, and went back to his seat.

Suddenly, something flew through the air straight at Yuigarde. “Hm?” Yuigarde had relaxed his defenses after sending Uliminas into the wall, and wasn’t able to harden his body in time.

“Master! Watch out!” Phufun jumped out in front of Yuigarde, her wings flared out to strike down whatever the things were. Then she got a closer look: they were Uliminas’s broken-off claws.

“No...” Yuigarde opened his eyes wide and turned to look at the ruined wall he had thrown Uliminas against. The hellcat, still buried under the rubble, had used the last of her magic to fire her own cast-off claws at him.

“Dammewt...” Uliminas cursed as her consciousness faded.

“Lady Uliminas!” A shadow demon ran up to the fallen body.

“You...” said Phufun. “Greanyl, the Silent Listener?” She spread her arms wide and an impossible number of black spiders appeared before her.

“I’ll be taking her!” Greanyl tossed a magic gem on the floor, and a blinding flash filled the room.

Phufun let out a grumble, covering her eyes with her arm as she ran towards Greanyl, but when the light had faded, Greanyl and Uliminas were already gone.

Yuigarde clicked his tongue several times in irritation, his expression sour. “What a nuisance,” he said, rising from the throne. “Capture them. Torture them until they submit and— Hm?” But then he saw a figure in the doorway. A cunning smile crept onto his face

when he realized who it was. “Gholl! Welcome!”

The two stood facing off with each other, Gholl fixing his half-brother, the Tyrant Yuigarde now occupying his throne, with a contemptuous glare.

It was Yuigarde who finally broke the silence. “Brother... No, Dark One Gholl! Your foolish deeds have cost you any approval you once had with your army!” He roared with laughter.

“W-Wait just a second, Yuigarde.” Sleip of the Infernal Four had been standing next to Yuigarde. He rushed up to the rebel. “We have not lost all approval for—”

Phufun interposed herself between Sleip and her master, blocking the lichsteed’s path. “Infernal Sleip, the Ritual Duel has already begun. Be a good boy and keep your promise not to interfere.”

“Excuse me?! Am I not to even *speak*?!”

Phufun pressed her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. “Of course not.”

“Gnhhh...” Sleip grit his teeth in anguish, but he had no choice but to stand down. With the Infernal quieted, Phufun stepped back behind the throne where the ominous magic circle was still glowing, Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya bound at its center.

“Now,” she said, “all that’s left is to fill the circle with their blood.” She summoned two magical swords, one to sever each of their necks.

“Hero Gold-Haaair!” Tsuya tried to say, “It’s been an honor to know yooou!” But all she could manage was, “Mmmmmmmmmmf! Mmmmmmmmmmph!”

“Don’t be a fool!” Gold-Hair tried to respond, “It’s too soon to give up!” But of course, it came out, “Mmph! Mmmmph!” He kept looking over at her as he struggled desperately. But no matter how he fought, the spider silk held him fast. Tsuya’s eyes were full of tears.



While this was happening behind the throne, Yuigarde and the Dark One Gholl stood glaring at each other. "Gholl!" Yuigarde shouted. "I will claim the title of Dark One from you and rule the world as the ultimate conqueror! This Ritual Duel will determine which of us will reign as the true Dark One!" Again he laughed, spreading his arms wide without taking his eyes off of Gholl.

Gholl folded his arms. For a while he simply stared at Yuigarde. Then he suddenly clenched his hand into a fist. "Yuigarde," he said, "can I ask you something?"

"Wh-What? Are you going to beg for your life?"

"No, not at all," Gholl responded. "I was just curious... What exactly did you mean by my 'foolish deeds'? I really have no idea what you're talking about." The Dark One tilted his head, puzzled. It seemed he was being earnest.

Yuigarde shook with rage. "Are you playing dumb with me? Now?!" He pointed an accusing finger at the Dark One and gesticulated wildly as he spoke, raising his voice in anger. "Very well! I will tell you! You say you're trying to recruit some *human* into our army, but your visits are nothing but self-indulgent merrymaking! You're purposely delaying our invasion to run around having a good time with humans! Even when you *did* invade, you drew back when it was time to deliver the killing blow! *Tell me* what this is if not foolishness! Do you deny it?!"

When Yuigarde had finished, Gholl brought his hand to his chin, seemingly deep in thought. "I see..." he said. "So you would call that foolish..." He turned to look at the three remaining of the Infernal Four, and his advisors, who were standing to the side. His eyes were shining with anger. Suddenly, a tremendous quantity of malice issued forth from the Dark One's body as he began to grow larger and larger, his rage obvious to anyone. The Infernals were struck motionless before his gaze. However, the three seemed somehow joyful.

"Yes," muttered Sleip. "This is what I had been waiting for. That rage... That driving spirit!"

"Our Dark One..." Yorminyt whispered. "Crush Yuigarde with your overwhelming power..."

"Strike him down, yes," said Hugi-Mugi. "Yes, strike him down and declare yourself the *true* Dark One!"

"And then, lead us to kill all of humanity!"

"With the Dark Army at your back, ssstrike humanity from this world!"

"Lord Gholl! We are ready to attack any time, yes! Yes, any time!" The Infernals and the advisors all watched Gholl keenly, with

joyful anticipation. Gholl spared them a glance and returned his attention to Yuigarde.

Finally... Phufun raised her right hand, and the swords floating in midair began to close in on the captives.

Everyone was certain that the duel was about to begin.

Gholl closed his eyes. The malicium filling the area vanished. His body returned to its original size.

Yuigarde, who had already been preparing himself for battle, staggered off-balance like he had missed a beat. “Wh-What?”

Gholl took a deep breath. “Hrm,” he said. “All right. If you all think my actions have been foolishness unworthy of a Dark One, then I will accept your verdict. I resign.” He took off the bracelet on his left arm, the sign of his station, and tossed it at Yuigarde. Yuigarde caught it, a stunned look on his face. Then, Gholl turned towards his Infernal Four. “Thanks for everything,” he said. “Keep well.”

He turned to leave the throne room, but after he had taken three steps, he stopped. “Oh, right,” he said. “I forgot.” A magic circle appeared in front of him as he spoke. “Yuigarde, here’s your thanks for looking after Uliminas.” Gholl raised his hand, thrusting it towards the magic circle. The next second, another magic circle appeared in front of Yuigarde. Before he realized what was happening, Gholl’s fist came flying out from the circle, striking him in the middle of his face.

Yuigarde cried out. Gholl’s fist sent him flying back into Phufun who had been standing behind the throne and readying the preparations for her own magic circle. She was thrown back as well. The two of them collided with the wall which shattered from the force. Yuigarde and Phufun flew outside, stumbling and tumbling.

Satisfied, Gholl turned and wordlessly left.

Everyone in the room was in shock at the development, and not one of them moved an inch.



Once Yuigarde had made his way back to the throne room from wherever in the world they had ended up, he called for all the Dark Army to assemble in the underground arena. Almost all came, with only a few exceptions.

“Today,” Yuigarde proclaimed to the crowd, “I have triumphed in the Ritual Duel! I am the new Dark One!” At first, the army was confused. The room was filled with disquiet and mumbling. They had heard nothing about this. But, at Yuigarde’s next words, the atmosphere changed completely: “As the Dark One, I will lead the whole of the Dark Army to begin our eradication of humanity at once!”

A great cheer erupted from the crowd. This was, after all, the Dark

Army. Many of the demons making up its ranks had always been warlike, but the Dark One Gholl had been postponing the invasion, keeping them out of the ring. Some of them were so fed up that they had been recklessly attacking random human villages. So you can only imagine how excited they were for the new Dark One Yuigarde to announce a recommencement of hostilities!

Yuigarde nodded his head, satisfied. Then, he raised his right arm. “Those of you who would reject my appointment, return your Demon Rings at once! The rest of you, prepare for war!”

The Demon Ring was a ring given by the Dark One to those who swore allegiance to him. Each one had a magic gem embedded in its face. The law among demonkind was that if one would refuse an order from the Dark One, they were to return their ring and depart the Dark Army at once.

None did.

The crowd cried out with jubilant cheers. “Long live the Dark One Yuigarde!”

“Crush the humans!”

“Prepare for war!”

And then they left the arena to prepare for their invasion. The Dark One Yuigarde nodded happily to himself as he watched.

Something landed at his feet with a clunk. “Hm?” He looked down and saw a large pile of rings. “These are Demon Rings...” There was a sheet of paper underneath. It read: “The hellcat Uliminas and the Silent Listeners humbly return their rings.”

“Dark One, what should we do?” asked Phufun. “I could bring them back by force, if you will.”

Yuigarde smirked. “Let them go,” he said. “They’re nothing but a lot of cowards. All they do is sneak about. My army has no need for them.” He laughed, and Phufun bowed deep.

And so a few days later, Yuigarde—the new Dark One—led almost every demon under his command to invade Klyrode Castle, the seat of human power. An invasion doomed to end in ignominious defeat.



The Dark Army set out from the Citadel and marched straight for Klyrode Castle, but the Princess ordered her army to use guerrilla tactics to harry them. They set countless traps along the Dark Army’s path: pitfalls, falling rocks, and trees that would collapse and crush Yuigarde’s forces. She set soldiers to lie in wait and ambush the Dark Army using hit-and-run tactics while her main force kept their distance, firing on the enemy with bows and stones and spells, never engaging directly. Still, Yuigarde ordered his soldiers to march forward.

In the end, the Dark Army was harassed to complete exhaustion. They lost a full third of their number, and the survivors were heavily injured. They had no choice but to retreat without ever coming in sight of the walls of Klyrode.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

“How?! How did this happen?!” The Dark One Yuigarde sat on his throne, trembling with anger. “You! Phufun!” He turned to shout at the succubus standing beside him. “What happened?! What is the meaning of this?!”

Phufun’s voice was full of hesitation when she spoke, shrinking before Yuigarde’s wrath. “W-Well, if you want my opinion... I think, um... The humans were so afraid of the strength of the new Dark One that they set more traps and ambushes than usual...or something.”

“*More than usual?! When Gholl did this there weren’t any traps, or any soldiers lying in wait! Why was Gholl able to reach the human castle when I couldn’t?!*”

Phufun went pale, cold sweat running down her brow. “Ah, m-maybe... This is just a thought but, maybe Gholl was lucky and managed to avoid them? I really don’t know...”

Phufun’s speculation was, of course, completely wrong. As the Dark One, Gholl had been scrupulous in his use of scouts to gather intelligence, only advancing his army after making sure to search for traps, drive off ambushes, and confirm the location of the enemy. For that reason, traps and ambushes had never been a major problem during his tenure. Moreover, it was Uliminas and the Silent Listeners who performed their duties as scouts with such consistent excellency.

Yuigarde, though, had no better grasp on the situation than Phufun. He clicked his tongue and said, “I guess there’s nothing we can do about luck.” He was silent for some time. “Nothing to do but build an army that isn’t afraid of some traps.”

“I think that would be best, Master.” She pressed her glasses up against the bridge of her nose. Incidentally, the glasses she was wearing at the time didn’t have actual lenses.

At Phufun’s words, Yuigarde’s bitter expression softened slightly. “All right, get to work on our forces. We attack again as soon as we’re ready.”

Phufun bowed deeply. Then, timidly, she raised her head. “Excuse me... Master?”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“Well...your orders are to build a greater army than the last, yet we lost a third of our fighting force in yesterday’s defeat. How am I to proceed?”

“Idiot!” Yuigarde raised his voice in anger and smacked Phufun

hard. The force of his blow sent her body through the air, impaling her in the ceiling. Yuigarde looked up at her suspended body. "Thinking about things like that is *your* job!" he spat. "Don't ask *me*!" With Phufun still stuck in the ceiling, he turned and left.

But Phufun was grinning. "Ahhh," she rhapsodized, her face red and a perverted smile on her face. "What sweet, sweet pain... The bliss of Master's fists... The bliss of breaking through the ceiling... So many amazing sensations filling my body... Hee hee... Hee hee hee hee... How splendid! Hee hee hee hee hee!"

◇Klyrode Castle—The Princess's Chambers◇

The Princess sat at her desk, reading reports about the recent campaign against the Dark Army, in which she had assumed the role of commander. During the fighting she had set up her headquarters near the front to receive the latest intelligence as quickly as possible and alter her battle plans on the fly as the situation changed. She made a special point to listen to the advice of her generals. She had some experience with mock battles from her tutelage as a member of the royal family, but this was, after all, her first time leading an actual army into battle. She would take in every bit of information and consider what the best possible move would be in the situation. Then she would hand down her decision, to be carried out immediately.

Such were the Princess's heroic efforts in leading the war effort that she exhausted every last ounce of her fortitude. When word came that the Dark Army had gone into full retreat, she collapsed on the spot.

She spent several days afterwards in bed, recovering from fatigue, but the campaign was an overwhelming victory for the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and her allies. However, the Princess was less overjoyed at her victory than she was at the news that her side had suffered shockingly few casualties.

Since then, she had passed the time poring over reports. As she did, she began to notice something strange. *I knew it...* she thought. *Here too. And also here...*

Every time an allied unit found themselves at a disadvantage, the metaphorical cavalry would come to save them without fail. At first, the Princess had assumed that these were the actions of reserve forces in the allied army, but as she studied the reports she realized that there were many incidents where a force would appear to rescue her soldiers even when the reserves were occupied elsewhere.

Moreover, the composition of these units was exceedingly strange. Sometimes it would be a man in a blue wolf mask accompanied by a silver wolf. Sometimes, an androgynous figure with something that looked like a ring around their head. Sometimes it was a party of four

humans and a psychobear. They would appear in small numbers, completely alter the course of the battle, and vanish.

The Princess nodded in understanding. *There's no doubt about it. Lord Flio and his companions lent us their strength.* She clasped her hands together, almost like she was praying. *He has done so much for us... This time, I will not allow him to turn down a reward.*

The Princess stood up and hurried out of her chambers.



The next day, the Princess issued a proclamation to all in and out of her kingdom: “For the attempted murder, defrauding, and defamation of the rightful Hero, acts considered high crimes in our law, the present King Klyrode is to be removed from office. His accomplices in these crimes are hereafter to be banished from Klyrode Castle.”

The King’s guilt in these many crimes against Flio was by now well attested. In the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, such acts were known as *lèse-héros* and were tantamount to treason. *Technically*, Flio was not actually the Hero. However, the Princess, under her authority as regent and representative of the royal family, had acknowledged him as equivalent to one. Therefore, went the argument, this law should apply to him as well.

The King’s empty seat, of course, was succeeded immediately by the next in line for the throne and acting regent: the Princess herself. From then on, she was known as the Maiden Queen. After her victory against the Dark Army, the Maiden Queen enjoyed tremendous popularity throughout the kingdom. Hardly anyone raised an objection to her ascension.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

At the same time as the Dark One Yuigarde was taking his epic defeat, there was a theft taking place in the Dark Citadel. An unknown culprit entered the Citadel treasury and left with a part of the treasure while Yuigarde was away with his army. With few guards left protecting the Citadel, the thief was able to find their way to the treasury, knock out the old soldier left protecting it, and take their keys.

When Yuigarde heard what had happened from Phufun, he clicked his tongue in irritation. “And? Do we know *anything* about them? Please tell me the guard was *at least* able to remember a face. As old as they are, they should be able to do *that* much.”

“Master... The treasury guard at the time was a skeleton named Calci’im. Apparently, a cloth...*thing* was suddenly pulled over its head

from behind, and it later awoke stuffed in a treasure box. I'm sorry, but we don't have any reliable information..." Phufun handed the Dark One a piece of cloth.

"What's this cloth for?" he asked. "It's very thin..."

"This is the cloth that Calci'im had pulled over its head, Master."

"This?! But with something so tiny over its face, it should have been able to *see*, right?!" He pulled and stretched at the cloth, staring like he was trying to burn a hole through whatever-it-was. Next to him, Phufun eyed it dubiously.

That cloth... It's faint, but I think it kind of looks like a lady's undergarments. She squinted and swapped out her glasses for a prescription pair, which she pressed up against the bridge of her nose.

◇Meanwhile, in a Forest◇

"Aha ha! Take that, you demons!" Hero Gold-Hair cackled as he ran through the forest, Tsuya following behind. The two had been captured by Phufun to be used as ritual sacrifices, but when Gholl sent Yuigarde and Phufun flying, they had managed to cut themselves free with a sword that had fallen on the floor and escaped in the confusion.

They hid in the castle for a while after that, but when the bulk of the Dark Army marched out to attack, they took their opportunity while the castle was short on staff to escape, taking the treasures of the Dark Citadel with them.

Hero Gold-Hair ran off, leading the way into the forest. "Aha ha ha ha! Do you believe me now?!" he bellowed. "I'm not about to meet my end in a place like this!"

"Waaait, Hero Gold-Haaaair!" Tsuya called after him. "Can you please run a little sloweerer?" Tsuya was running awkwardly with her knees turned inward, clearly nervous about her lower body.

"What's wrong? What happened to the panties you used on that skeleton guy?"

"Don't call them paaanties! That makes it sound weeeird!"

"What difference does it make? But anyway, why don't you just put on another pair of panties?"

"Stop calling them paaanties! And I can't—I'm all out!"

"Honestly," said Hero Gold-Hair, "what am I going to do with you? You can have a pair of mine, I suppose."

"I'm not going to wear *booooy* underwear!" she cried.

"How selfish can you—well, look, just use them until we find a town, okay?"

"But someone might seeee!"

The two argued as they ran through the woods. At the time, they had no idea that one of Phufun's black spiders had followed them. It

had turned into a black mist, and sneaked inside Hero Gold-Hair's Bottomless Bag. The very same bag that was full of the Dark Citadel's plundered treasures.

◇Houghtow City◇

Flio and Rys were walking through the streets of Houghtow. Rys, like always, clung to her husband's arm. Today she was in exceptionally high spirits. She hummed as they went along. "The battle yesterday was so *fun*, my love," she said. "It's been so long since I've been able to *cut loose* like that!"

"Your happiness is everything to me, Rys," said Flio, smiling at his wife.

Rys smiled back and continued, pressing her body close to Flio's as she spoke. "And I was privileged to see such truly incredible feats from my lord husband!"

"Hiya and Sybe did a lot too, I think," Flio said.

"Yes, they did...but poor Balirossa! Getting caught up in Sybe's charge like that... I think she blacked out. And she was the most enthusiastic about this!"

"I'll never forget it. At first I thought Balirossa had just gotten a little overzealous and charged in too far." The two of them burst into laughter at the memory of the sight. "So Rys," Flio said after they had finished, "what are you in the mood for today?"

But Rys didn't get a chance to respond. Suddenly, a voice came from behind them. "Excuse me, may we come along as well?" It was Ghozal. Uliminas was with him, both in human form.

◇Flio's House—Later◇

Balirossa hummed to herself as she passed through the front door on her way back from hunting. Sybe was at her heels in its unicorn rabbit form. When she came to the living room, she grinned widely to see Flio home. "Lord Flio, I have returned! It was a good hunt today!" She strode into the room with an air of victory.

The man sitting directly across from Flio turned to face her. "Oh, excellent!" he said. When Balirossa saw who it was, she turned and ran for the entryway with incredible speed, almost flying back out of the house.

"Wh-Why is the D-D-Dark One here?!" she stood rigid in front of the door as she took in the situation, cold sweat already breaking out on her brow.

"Hrm," said Ghozal, nodding his head at the fleeing knight. "You see how nimbly she moves her body? Balirossa really is something

special.” He sounded impressed.

Uliminas looked aghast. “Meow?! She’s just running away! What is *wrong* with mew?!”

But Ghozal just continued to nod his head as if he couldn’t hear her.



Flio and Rys sat at a table in the living room facing Ghozal and Uliminas. Hiya was on standby, waiting quietly behind Flio. And to the side of the living room, attempting to hide behind the staircase, Blossom, Byleri, and Belano stood watching keenly.

Ghozal looked at the three humans and smiled. “Oh, you three,” he said. “I’m not the Dark One anymore, you know. You can relax.”

“What, really?” said Blossom.

“W-Well, um,” said Byleri, “like, it’s still scary though?”

Belano said nothing. She was shaking with fear.

As the three slowly pulled themselves to their feet, Uliminas suddenly changed her shape, switching back to her demon form.

“Make no mewstake,” she said. “We are still demeowns.”

“Whaaa?!” cried Blossom.

“Oh no! Help? Like, someone?” shouted Byleri.

Belano said nothing. She was already sprinting up the stairs. In a second, the other two came stumbling after.

Flio grimaced. “Miss Uliminas,” he said, “I would appreciate it if you showed some consideration towards them.”

“*Fine*,” said the hellcat, and let out a quiet little sigh as she returned to her human form.

Ghozal, meanwhile, had finished his cup of tea. He turned his attention back towards Flio. “Well then,” he said. “What do you think of our earlier proposition? Do we have your consent?”

Hiya looked curious at those words. “Exalted One, what did Lord Ghozal ask of you?”

“Ah,” said Flio. “Right.” He turned his head towards the staircase that Blossom, Byleri, and Belano had vanished up earlier. “I think we should let everyone have a chance to speak their mind. Could you come out for a bit? And get Balirossa too?”

“Huh?” answered Blossom. “You want *our* opinions?” With great trepidation, the three made their way into the living room. Almost immediately after, Balirossa stepped back inside. She had finally managed to still her heart and prepare herself mentally.

Flio glanced over the assembled household. “I called you all here because Ghozal asked me if he and Uliminas could stay at this house for a while.” He smiled, as did Ghozal, sitting across from him. “I

want to give everyone a chance to share their opinions.”

“Erm, yes,” said Ghozal. “I’ve explained the situation to Rys and Mister Flio, but basically I ended up very suddenly resigning as the Dark One. It would probably be a bad idea to live in the territory controlled by the Dark Army, see, but when it comes to the human world, those two are the only ones I really know. We won’t be any trouble, and if you want, we’ll leave once we find other lodging. But I would really appreciate it if you could put us up, if only until we find something else...” He bowed his head.

“I don’t believe Rys or I have any objections...” said Flio. Rys nodded in agreement.

Hiya pondered for a moment before responding. “If the Exalted One and his wife approve, I have no issue with it, of course.” They bowed.

“Come to think of it,” said Blossom, “is it really our place to find fault with what the Lord and Lady decide to do? We’re imposing on their hospitality ourselves, you know.”

“I agree,” said Belano quietly. She, Blossom, and Byleri nodded. But Balirossa shot up to her feet.

“Y-You! What are you *saying*?!” she wailed. “Perhaps he’s retired, but this is the *former Dark One*! And that woman works for him, does she not? D-Do you really want *them* to stay *here*?!” She pointed a finger at Ghozal and Uliminas, her hand and body both trembling.

Ghozal made a pained look...or perhaps he was impressed. “Hrm,” he said. “You are an excellent guard, Ser Balirossa, to suspect the worst even now.”

Uliminas scowled. “Mewdiot. She’s just being a scaredy-cat.” If Ghozal heard Uliminas’s words, he gave no sign of it.

Once again, Balirossa spoke up. “W-Well, I’m opposed! Absolutely! One hundred percent against it!”

Rys gave Balirossa a sharp look. “Balirossa,” she said. “Do you really mean to turn away Ghozal and Uliminas when they have nowhere else to go?”

“Huh?” Balirossa looked suddenly alarmed. She froze on the spot, her eyes wild with confusion and panic.

“My...” said Hiya. “I had no idea Lady Balirossa was so coldhearted.” They stared intently at the former knight’s face.

Blossom also glanced over at her. “I thought you would be more compassionate than that...” she said.

“Like, it’s like I don’t know you anymore...” said Byleri.

Belano said nothing and just stared.

Balirossa’s mouth opened and closed, failing to produce any coherent sound. Withering before the gazes of everyone in the room, she subconsciously took a step back. She felt something bump into her

leg. “Huh?” Looking down, she saw Sybe, in its unicorn rabbit form, poking at her leg. It nodded. “Sybe...” she said, her voice shaking. “You want to let them stay too?” Sybe gave a happy affirmative snuffle. Balirossa looked like she was about to cry.

Balirossa did eventually agree to let Ghozal and Uliminas stay, but that’s a story for another time.

◇That Night◇

Uliminas crawled into a bed in one of the empty rooms in the second story of Flio’s house, and immediately sprawled out to sleep. At first, Ghozal had insisted that he wouldn’t mind sharing a room with Uliminas. “We shouldn’t be troubling you for too long, after all,” he’d said. But Uliminas had insisted otherwise.

“Meow...*meowron!*” she’d spurted out, blushing bright red. “You think I wanna sleep with *mew?*!”

And so, the two were given separate rooms.

There was a knock at the door. “Uliminas? Are you awake?” Rys poked her head into Uliminas’s room.

“No,” she said. “I’m asleep.”

“So she says, anyway,” Rys rejoined. Uliminas responded by pretending to snore loudly.

Rys smirked in amusement and sat down on the foot of the bed. “I guess she’s asleep,” she said. “I’ll just sit here and talk to myself. I can’t help but wonder how Ghozal could have neglected to take any money, if he had someone as scrupulous as Uliminas with him.”

“...It’s the Silent Listeners,” Uliminas muttered.

“Your spies?”

“Yeah...” Uliminas continued without opening her eyes or moving from her position. “They defected from the Dark Army with me. But they didn’t enough meowney saved to live on, so Ghozal the meowron went and gave all of our funds to them.”

“That sounds like Ghozal,” Rys said. “He looks like he’d be a ‘might makes right’ type, but the truth is that he takes care of the people around him first and foremost.”

“And it’s always my purproblem when he does...”

Rys gave Uliminas a fond smile. “Tell me something, Uliminas. I’ve heard that you were in love with him. Are you still?”

“I have no idea what mew’re talking about.”

“Is that why you came here with him?”

“I dunno about that.”

“Then you wouldn’t have a problem if Ghozal gets involved with Balirossa?”

“Like *hell* I’m gonna let that human get her paws on him!”

Uliminas kicked up and landed on her feet, standing on the bed. It dawned on her that Rys was staring, and she flushed red, suddenly going motionless once again.

Uliminas dove back under the covers. "I'm just talking in my sleep," she said. "Doesn't mean mewnything."

Rys couldn't help from snickering.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

"What?! We're *still* not ready to attack Klyrode?! Phufun, what is the meaning of this?!" Yuigarde raised his voice in anger and stood up from his throne. He had once more given the order to attack Klyrode, only to be told that they were hardly any more ready to marshal a fighting force than they had been the day after their defeat.

"I-I'm so terribly sorry, Master..." Phufun was kneeling on the floor. She bowed her head deeply. The Dark One Yuigarde glared at her, clicking his tongue repeatedly in irritation.

"Well?! When *will* we be ready, then?!"

"I... I don't..." Phufun started to sweat. She had no answer. The delay in preparations was natural enough. It had not even been half a month since a third of the Dark Army was lost in the attack on Klyrode. Phufun was between a rock and a hard place trying to find ways to make up for the loss.

Furthermore, many of the surviving soldiers had made petitions asking for more time before they were called back into service. They all stated that they needed to recover from their wounds, but for many this was only a pretext. Among their number were demons who had set out on their own to attack human settlements back when Gholl was the Dark One—demons who had been driven away by Flio. When they saw the same human in a blue wolf mask and the silver wolf by his side coming to the aid of the human forces, they were gripped by all sorts of powerful emotions. Some remembered the man's overwhelming power and simply lost heart. Others felt themselves indebted to the man who had spared their lives. None of them were all that excited at the prospect of another offensive.

Phufun could tell that it would be next to impossible to draft enough soldiers only from demons directly under the control of the Dark Army. So, she had begun to reach out to other demon lords whose territory was near the Dark Citadel. They had, after all, sworn loyalty to the Dark One, and now Phufun requested their aid. But almost none agreed, due to Yuigarde being held in very poor regard by most of the demons. When he was known as the Tyrant, Yuigarde had developed a poor reputation with his peers for his arrogance, rudeness, violent disposition, and drinking habits (as it just so turned out, he was even worse when he was drunk). Nothing he had done in

his tenure as the Dark One had shown any sign of his behavior having changed.

In fact, Yuigarde had been drunk when representatives of the other demon lords came to formally congratulate him for his ascension to the role of Dark One. He derisively mocked the messengers and told Phufun, "I don't feel like it today. Tell 'em to come back tomorrow." They were sent away without ever meeting the new Dark One. It's probably no surprise that this story ended up widely circulated.

Even worse, Yuigarde had led his army to a historic defeat by Klyrode. Demonkind had already begun to turn its back on the Dark One Yuigarde.

The Dark One Yuigarde kept on screaming in anger at Phufun as the three surviving Infernals watched from alongside the throne. Sleip sighed. "I had never intended for things to come to this."

"We brought thisss on oursselves..." Yorminyt folded her arms and gazed somberly up at the ceiling. "We were short-sssighted. If only we had lissstened to Uliminasss and helped her throw that ssscoundrel in the dungeons..."

Hugi-Mugi's two heads were both downcast. "Lord Gholl... Yes, Gholl the lord..." they said. Their conspiracy against the Dark One Gholl had ended in nothing but regret for the three of them.

And still, before their eyes, the Dark One Yuigarde carried on, taking his terrible temper out on Phufun.

Intermission

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Flio was sitting at the desk in his room, crafting items out of dragon scales. He cast a spell on his fingertips that let him cut and bend the hard material, gradually shaping it into a shield. When he finished, he let out a soft breath and held the shield up with both hands, turning it up and down and left and right to confirm that everything was in order.

"Yeah," he said. "This one came out all right." Satisfied, he smiled.

There was a knock on the door and Rys stepped inside. "My love," she said as she walked up to Flio. "Perhaps it's time for a break?" She was carrying cups of black tea on a serving tray.

"Thank you," said Flio. "You chose the perfect time." He put the shield down on his desk and stretched his arms above his head. Rys placed a cup of tea in an empty spot on Flio's desk and sat down herself in a chair next to her husband.

As Flio began to drink, Rys's gaze fell on the shield and her eyes went wide. "I never stop being impressed by you," she said. "I have never seen such a splendid dragonscale shield in all my life!"

"Did you use dragonscale shields in the Dark Army?" asked Flio.

"We had a legion of dragons, you know," she said. "We used old scales the dragons shed to make equipment. But I never saw anything like *this*." Her eyes were shining as she continued to gaze at the shield.

"Your flattery always makes me happy, Rys."

"It isn't flattery!" she protested. "I'm simply stating facts. Were you a craftsman in the world you came from too?"

"Hm..." Flio trailed off. "I've fixed carts and fences and shelves, but I couldn't use magic back then. There was no way I could ever have made something like this."

"I find that hard to imagine. I almost can't believe there was ever a time when my lord husband couldn't use magic."

Flio laughed. "It's true, though! And I still have trouble controlling my power." Flio returned his empty cup to the tray. "Right," he said. "Work's done for the day. Shall we head into town?"

Rys's face burst into a smile at those words. "I would love to!" As she stood up, though, she noticed that Flio had left the shield lying on the desk. "Are you not going to sell that shield, my lord?"

“I’m gonna hold off on that for a bit. I’m planning something, so I won’t be selling any of the items I make for some time.”

“You are?” Rys curiously followed Flio out of the room.

◇Meanwhile, in Byleri’s Room◇

Hiya materialized in Byleri’s room on the second floor of the house. They snatched up a book from under the bed and looked at it with great interest. “Fascinating...” they said.

And then the door opened, and Byleri came into the room. She was wiping the sweat from her brow—it looked like she had just finished working in the pasture. “Ahh,” she sighed. “I’m like, wiped... Huh?!” With a start, she noticed Hiya and the book they had in their hand. She went beet red and then charged straight at the intruding genie.

“Oh, Madam Byleri. I apologize for not asking before I looked. I happened to notice a very interesting book hidden underneath your bed, and thought I would—”

“Well, like, you can’t! Stop! It’s a secret, y’know?!” Without letting Hiya finish, she went to snatch the book from their hand.

She tried, anyway.

“No,” said Hiya. “I find this book quite fascinating. Look, the way the bodies are arranged in this picture... I would have never thought of that.”

“Ah?! No, give it back!” Byleri whined. She was certain she had grabbed the book away from Hiya, but somehow it was back in their hands. Upset, she once again reached out to grab at it only for Hiya to use Teleportation and vanish from her sight.

“Wha—?! Whahah?!” Her target gone, Byleri overextended herself and fell on the floor.

Hiya once again appeared next to her, still poring through the book. “This would be of tremendous use for training in my mindscape. I understand this is a sudden request, but may I borrow this?”

“You can’t! No way! Like, give it back!” Byleri scrambled to her feet, her face still red as she made another grab at the book. This time, Hiya teleported away entirely, along with Byleri’s precious book: *Affairs of the Night: An Introduction Featuring Forty-Eight Illustrated Positions!*

Byleri was of an age where she was becoming perhaps a little *too* interested in such things.

◇The Garden◇

Blossom was hard at work weeding in the garden as always. “All that’s left is the cyarrots, Sybel!” she said, turning to the unicorn rabbit

by her side. “Just a bit more!” Sybe snuffled happily at her words and kept on weeding alongside her.

Sybe was standing on its two hind legs, skillfully pulling up weeds with both forelegs and storing them in the crook between its foreleg and body. Blossom grinned at the sight of Sybe at work. “But jeez! This garden’s gotten pretty big, hasn’t it? It’s getting to be a bit more than you and I can handle, Sybe.” Blossom stood up and let out a tired breath, wiping at her brow.

Two goblins were spying on the pair from the forest. “Well? What say you?” said one to the other.

“Hmm...” the other goblin responded. “I don’t think the barrier extends this far... And it’s just a woman and a rabbit...”

“Hm. Indeed. Shall we, then?”

“You read my mind.” The two goblins nodded, and, wielding their clubs, ran out of the forest.

“You! Woman! Give us your food if you value your life!”

“Shoo, rabbit! Give us the food!”

Blossom startled as the goblins came tearing loudly from the forest. “Wha... Goblins?!” She picked up the hoe she had set to the side.

“Gwah ha ha! Fool! Is that a hoe? You cannot defeat the great Hokh’hokton with the likes of—”

“Shut it!” Blossom brought her hoe down on the goblin’s grinning head, driving its entire face into the ground with the force of the swing.

“That hoe...” he moaned. “What is it made of...?”

“Oh, this?” said Blossom, grinning. “Lord Flio made it special. It’s dragonscale.”

“No... No fair... Ghk!” Hokh’hokton choked out the words and then collapsed, lifeless and limp.

“She got Hokh’hokton!” the other shrieked. “No, wait... If I can take care of the rabbit, then—” His eyes opened wide. The rabbit that had been bearing down on him was gone. In its place was a psychobear twice the goblin’s size. Sybe had returned to its original form. “A-Ah?”

“Gwoar!” roared Sybe as it swung its right arm at the intruder. One attack was enough to knock the second goblin flat on its face.



Blossom and Sybe, still in its psychobear form, stood in front of the two goblins. They had tied them up tight. “So you’re Maunty, and you’re Hokh’hokton?”

“Yes, you have it right...”

“Uh huh...” Resigned to their fate, the two goblins nodded along

grimly.

Blossom sighed. "And y'all came here to steal our vegetables? Are you with the Dark Army?"

"Oh, no," said Hokh'hokton. "The two of us are mere deserters."

"Yeah?" asked Blossom. "You are?"

The goblins began to tell their story. They had once served in the Dark Army under the command of two ogre brothers. However, when the ogres sent them to attack a human village, they were beaten within an inch of their life and captured by a man in a blue wolf mask followed by a silver lupine demon.

Hokh'hokton and Maunty had fully expected to die then and there, but the man let them go under the condition that they were "never to attack humans again."

"Me and Hokh'hokton, we felt so grateful to be alive, we quit the army on the spot."

"Alas, with but the two of us, we could not hunt well enough to keep us full. Perhaps you are aware, but most magic beasts are far, far stronger than goblins."

"So," said Blossom. "You were so hungry you couldn't stand it, and when you saw me working the garden, you made up your mind to come pilfering?"

"Yes..." said Maunty. "Pretty much."

"As much as it shames us to break our oath of not attacking humans..." added Hokh'hokton. The goblins hung their heads in unison. Blossom crossed her arms and looked the two over.

"All right," she said. "I have a proposition. You two know much about farm work?"

"What?" Both goblins looked shocked at the words. But Blossom just smiled.

"This isn't a commercial enterprise, you understand?" said Blossom. "We don't sell these for a profit, so I can't give you a salary or nothin'. But I *will* give you food. Sound good?"

"I... I have no words!" said Hokh'hokton. "Thank you!"

"You're really gonna take us on after we attacked you?" asked Maunty.

"Hey," said Blossom. "From what you told me you don't sound like bad guys!"

The two goblins exchanged a look, grinning jubilantly. "We... We'll never forget this!"

"We shall work until our bones are dust!"

The two goblins bowed deeply. Blossom just grinned and patted the two of them firmly on the shoulders.

Belano sat at her desk in the faculty office of the Houghtow College of Magic. She was looking all around her, clearly agitated by something. *Why?* she thought as cold sweat started to bead on her forehead. *How did this happen...?*

Back when she had served Klyrode Castle as part of Balirossa's knightly company, she had excelled in defensive magic but had been completely unable to use any attack spells. When she came to live at Flio's house she began to study magic under Flio and Rys, but both were too far above her to be of much help.

Eventually Belano resolved to study magic again, starting with the very basics, and when she heard from the local Adventurers' Association that the Houghtow College of Magic was accepting members of the general public, she enrolled in a heartbeat.

But, when her incredible skill at defensive magic became known, she ended up being scouted as a teacher. Today was her first day on the job.

"At least they're still going to let me take offensive magic classes..." she muttered to herself. She was doing her level best to stay calm. "And they're waiving my tuition...and they're paying me..."

"Good job making it through your first day, Professor Belano." A voice came from behind her. She turned to see the smiling face of Oryou, the offensive magic teacher. She was dressed as always in her unique fashion: a *kimono* from the Far East.

"Th-Thank you..." she said. She looked like she was barely holding back her urge to bolt out of the room, but she somehow managed to return Oryou's smile.

"It's okay to be nervous," said Oryou. "You've never been on the other side of the classroom, have you?"

Another professor walked up to them—Metálzobi, the Projection Art teacher. Projection was a form of magic used to create illusory images. Some, like Metálzobi and his students, used it as a form of visual art.

"You know," he said, "I was in your position once too. I enrolled in college to study magic and ended up getting scouted as a teacher. I guess I feel a little bit of a kinship with you. I'd like to get to know you better at some point." He smiled and patted Belano on the shoulder.

Belano thanked the two many, many times and bowed her head, although she didn't look any less stressed. Then, her eyes fell on the pen case on her desk. That pen case was a present to her from Flio. He had made it himself to commemorate Belano's new position. *Lord Flio is cheering for me too...* she thought, balling up her hands into tight

fists. *I can do this...*





A chime sounded, and Belano headed for her first class of the day. She entered through the back door like she always did and chose a seat all the way in the back, as was her habit. But this time, some of the students began to take notice.

“Hey,” someone whispered. “Isn’t she the professor?”

“She is...” their friend replied. “But she’s been sitting in that corner taking notes for a while now...”

Belano’s face turned red when she heard them whispering and stood up. She had entered the classroom from the students’ side and sat down like she had done every day at the college until just yesterday. Realizing her mistake, she ran up to the teacher’s podium, quite flustered.

I can do this, she repeated to herself. *I... I can do this...* She was so embarrassed she felt she might die. She was bright red with her head hung low, the pen case Flio had given her clenched tightly in her hand.

Chapter 4: A Steamy Hot Spring Vacation

◇Houghtow City◇

In a corner of Houghtow was a three-story masonry building: the headquarters of the Merchants' Guild. Rys standing to the side of the main door, waiting.

Flio stepped out of the building. "Rys, I'm back!"

Rys happily strolled towards her husband. "It's good to see you, my love!" Flio beamed and ran up. "Did you finish your business here?" Rys asked.

"I did. The procedure was a lot more straightforward than I expected. All that's left is to wait and see if it passes the examination."

"I'm certain it will. It is yours, after all."

"Well, I'm glad you're so sure," said Flio, smiling at his wife who had by this point begun to lightly cling to his left arm. "Either way, all we have to do now is wait." Suddenly seeming to remember something, he took a piece of paper out of his pants pocket. "Oh, and also this!" he said. "The people at the guild gave me this. Apparently it's their thanks for me helping them out..."

"What is it, my love?" Rys looked curiously at the ticket in Flio's hand.

"A lottery ticket, apparently," he said. "They told me there's a discount sale happening in the shopping district. It sounds like there's some kind of event going on."

"A lottery... What kind of lottery is this, exactly?"

"I'm not sure myself. This is the first I've heard of it too. But since we have the ticket, shall we go check it out?"

"Certainly!"

The two of them walked side by side through the crowded shopping district. Today it seemed even more crowded than usual. "Is it always like this when there's a sale?" Rys mused, looking curiously all around her. "It looks like a festival."

"It does, doesn't it," said Flio. "It's probably something like a festival for the shops here. There were events like this in my world too, when merchants would sell all sorts of things for cheap. A lot of people would come to try to get good bargains."

“Oh? I see. Did you sell your wares in such events too, my lord?”

“No,” said Flio. “I was in charge of inventory. I was always interested in sales, but I ended up in this world before I could try my hand at it.”

Flio and Rys chatted about this and that as they made their way towards the plaza in the middle of the shopping district. “Oh,” said Flio. “This is it, Rys. The lottery should be around here.” Flio looked around the plaza, and saw an area where an even larger crowd had gathered than there was everywhere else. They were gathering in front of a tent decorated in a banner that read “Lottery Grounds.”

“Yeah, that’s gotta be it,” said Flio. “We should get in line.”

“All right,” said Rys. The two of them took their place in the back of the line. “It seems tremendously popular, this lottery...”

“They have some incredible stuff,” said Flio. “Look!” He pointed to the back of the tent, where a large paper was pinned up listing the lottery prizes.

Rys squinted as she looked at it. “My lord husband...” she said, “I know what the first prize is, but the second prize is a ‘hot springs vacation’? What exactly is a hot spring?”

“Hm? Rys, you don’t know about hot springs?”

“N-No... I’d never heard them mentioned in the Dark—I mean, in the place I used to work. What about you, my lord husband?”

“Yeah, we had them in my world too. Hot springs are good for all kinds of things!” Flio looked again at the list of prizes. “Second place prize is a trip to the Kinasaki Hot Springs. It sounds like there are seven springs, all with different benefits. Vitality... Beautiful skin... Health... Oh, this one is for people hoping for children...”

“My lord husband!” Rys shot a look at Flio, a strange light in her eyes. She sidled up to him even closer. “What did you just say?!”

“Hm? You mean...the seven hot springs?”

“No, after that! The benefits!”

“The...benefits?” Flio had a sudden moment of panic over what the people around him must think about Rys crawling all over him in full view of the crowd, but Rys only drew closer.

“Yes! The benefits!”

“U-Um, Vitality, Beautiful skin...”

“No, not those! The last one!”

“The last one? That’s... Oh! You mean the one for people who want children?”

“Yes!” Rys’s face was aglow with excitement. “That means it might help us make babies, doesn’t it?!” Somehow, she drew even closer to Flio. Her eyes were sparkling.

Flio, for his part, was feeling ever more mortified. “Ah, I... Well, yes, that might very well be the case.”

“It might!” Rys turned to look at the tent. “Let’s aim for that one, my husband! We have to get the second prize no matter what!” Rys squeezed her fists tight as she stared fixedly at the list of prizes. Her cheeks were red. She was breathing hard. There was absolutely no mistaking her excitement. She was so excited, in fact, that she had at some point sprouted a wolf tail. Right now it was wagging vigorously from side to side.

Flio noticed and quickly hid her tail with magic. But this resulted in Rys’s skirt seeming to move around on its own accord as her invisible tail wagged underneath it. Her undergarments were in full view.

Flio, blushing, positioned himself behind Rys, hoping that with him blocking the line of sight, nobody else would notice.

Finally, they worked their way through the line and reached the tent. “One ticket?” asked the woman wearing bright red festival garb. “All right, draw one of the tabs from the box, please.”

Rys, who Flio had entrusted with their lottery ticket, looked at the large box in the woman’s hands. “So...I stick my hand in this hole and pull out a tab?”

“Yes, exactly. Oh! And no using magic to see what you’re getting. There’s a magic sensor in the hole—it’ll make a sound if it detects any magic. You don’t get a prize if the sensor goes off!”

“I... I see...” Rys shook her hand, swallowing nervously. Flio smirked knowingly as he watched. It didn’t escape his attention that Rys had hastily turned off the sensor spell she had been using. Rys took a deep breath and slowly reached into the hole. She closed her eyes tight enough for wrinkles to appear on her forehead as she fervently searched around inside the box with her hand.

“I have it!” Rys’s eyes shot open, and she pulled her hand out. She was clutching a wooden tab, about the size of her palm. It was blue. “What prize is this?!” she asked, thrusting the tab in front of the woman in the festival attire.

The woman smiled cheerfully for a moment. Then, she picked up a handbell from the desk and took a deep breath. “Congratulations!” she shouted, ringing the bell as loud as an alarm. “We have a winner for our second prize: a hot springs vacation for two!”

“Ooh?! Someone got the second prize!”

“Nice going, missy!”

“Congrats!” Cheers and congratulations rang out from all around the tent.

As the crowd applauded, Rys raised her arms high in the air in celebration. “My lord husband! I did it! I did it! I did it!” She squeezed him tight, grinning with her whole face. Flio caught her in his arms,

smiling the whole time. Rys was positively bursting with joy. Not just her tail, now, but her wolf ears also had become visible. Flio rushed to hide them the same way he had hidden her tail, the whole time holding her in his arms and grinning.

It was some time before the applause and cheers died down.



◇Flio and Rys's Room—That Night◇

Flio and Rys had been roundly congratulated by everyone who lived with them for winning a hot springs vacation in a lottery. "Your faithful servant Hiya will tend to the affairs of your house, Exalted One," Hiya had said. "So please, relax and enjoy yourself." Balirossa, Blossom, Byleri, and Belano, and even Ghozal and Uliminas who had only recently started living with them nodded along to Hiya's words.

Now, Rys was lying in bed, her head resting against her husband's arm. "My love, I'm looking forward to this trip, you know..."

Flio smiled. "Things have been so busy at home. You and I have hardly had a chance to travel anywhere," he said. "It's a bit late, I guess, but maybe we could consider this our honeymoon."

"Our...honeymoon?" Rys flushed a little, smiling happily at Flio's words. "When we go to the hot springs, my love, I intend to make full use of the childbirth water. So, please... You'll treat me properly, won't you?" She crawled up onto Flio's chest as she spoke.

"And...tonight, as well." She closed her eyes, and pressed her lips to his. Flio pulled Rys into a tight embrace and turned off the magic lantern, leaving the room in darkness.

◇Deep in a Forest◇

Deep in a forest somewhere, Tsuya was looking troubled. "O-Oh... Hero Gold-Hair, are you all riiight?"

Hero Gold-Hair had collapsed onto his hands and knees on the ground in front of her and was now moaning in pain. "I don't know..." he said. "Why... Why do I feel so strange... Like there's something inside of me..." He clawed at his chest, his face twisted in agony.

"Aaah! H-Hero Gold-Haaair!" Tsuya put her hand on Gold-Hair's shoulder, her eyes full of worry. But neither of them noticed the black mist seeping out of the Bottomless Bag on his belt slowly entering his body through his nose and mouth as he breathed in...

◇Flio's House—The Following Morning◇

Flio was standing in the entryway to his house, cheerfully waving goodbye to everyone. "Right then, we're off!"

"We'll see you in two days!" added Rys, grinning.

"Tell us if the place is any good!" said Blossom. "Next time maybe we'll all go!" Everyone who was being left behind nodded cheerfully.

Flio smiled back. "Of course! It would be great to go on a trip with everyone!" With that, he raised his right hand and summoned a small

magic circle as a larger one appeared in front of himself and Rys. “And we’re off!” he said, pulling Rys in close. A second later, the circle vanished, taking the couple with it.

◇Kinosaki Hot Springs Village◇

Flio and Rys emerged from the magic circle onto a peaceful village road. Here and there they could see steam rising. The unique scent of the hot springs reached Rys’s nose and she squeezed Flio’s arm happily. “Oh how I’ve looked forward to this, my love.” But as she turned her head to look at her husband, something suddenly caught her attention. She whipped her head around and her smile vanished. “What is...*that*?”

In the middle of the peaceful village road, there stood an enormous monster. Its head was that of a bull, its lower body a ram’s. It had a mane of golden hair. It raised its absurdly large head and bellowed as it stomped through the village towards them, flattening buildings indiscriminately. The part of the village nearest to the mountains already looked badly damaged. Tongues of flame lapped at the buildings behind the monster.

Rys stared in shock. “What is... What...?” Her body began to shake as the rage built and built inside her. “You...fiend!” she shrieked. “How *dare* you interfere with my dream honeymoon!” She dodged past Flio as he moved to stop her and charged straight for the monster, turning into a giant wolf as she ran. Rys the lupine roared as she plowed into the thing, toppling it backwards.

“Oh no!” Flio’s abilities detected a number of humans in the path of the collapsing monster. He raised both hands and conjured a magic circle, summoning a wall of light in the path of its fall. The monster crashed into Flio’s wall and slid down. Rys charged the thing again without hesitation, knocking it back against the wall once more.

Flio used his right hand to maintain the wall while he created another magic circle with his left, teleporting the people away to a safe area. “It might be a bit of a mess if we do this right here,” he said. Once again he brought both arms in front of him, and a vast magic circle appeared in the air above Rys and the monster she was wrestling. He lowered his hands and the circle fell, swallowing up the two of them as it reached their bodies before disappearing on impact with the ground. Rys and her opponent were nowhere to be seen. “Well, that worked okay,” Flio said. He sighed with relief and raised his right arm one final time.

A large magic circle appeared before Flio. He walked into the center of it and was sucked in, vanishing from sight.

◇A Forest◇

A colossal magic circle appeared somewhere in a wild forest untouched by human hands. Out from it came Rys and the monstrous creature.

This monster held tremendous magic, but it was not fully capable of controlling its power. It lashed out again and again with magic, writhing in pain each time. Rys, however, had always been strong with magic. She struck and struck at the thing, enraged that it would dare stand in the way of her hot springs vacation with her husband! As their magic attacks collided, she tore at the monster with her claws and teeth.

In the shadow of the clashing beasts, Flio was engaged in a struggle of an entirely different sort. A jet of flame from the monster's mouth missed Rys and sailed off into the forest, setting the trees alight, but Flio used his magic to extinguish the blaze. One of the magic bolts from Rys's spells strayed off course, but Flio dispelled it before it could do any damage, then created a barrier around the area. All in all, he devoted himself to working behind the scenes, using his magic to mitigate as much damage as possible.

Flio could tell this monster had a decently impressive level of magic, but he was sure it was nothing Rys in her lupine form couldn't handle. He thought it best to let Rys vent her anger on the thing and take care of things from the back like this. He was not wrong. Rys had no trouble wiping the floor with the thing. Not for one second was she at a disadvantage.

The fight didn't last long. The monster let out a sound halfway between a howl and a scream and fell to the ground. Rys stood triumphantly in her lupine form, looking down imperiously at her fallen foe. "Now you will pay the price for getting in our way," she growled. "With blood!" Her claws gleamed cruelly as she prepared the finishing blow.

But then, quite suddenly, a woman popped out from the monster's golden mane on the top of its head. "I'm soooorry!" she shouted. "I'm so, so soooorry! Please, pleaaaase don't kill uuus! He's not doing this 'cause he waaants to!" The woman, her clothing ripped, her hair burnt in patches, her body covered in cuts and scrapes, supplicated herself desperately before the wolf. "A weeeird black mist came out of *this*!" she said, holding up a Bottomless Bag. "It went in his boody and made him like thaaat! He couldn't controool himself!"

Flio used Teleportation and appeared between Rys and Tsuya, magically floating in the air. He flew up to Tsuya where she was standing in the monster's golden mane and took the bag from her hands. As he checked the contents, he knit his brow. "What's this...?" The bag was full to the brim with precious jewelry: necklaces and collars and the like set with gems, mundane and magical. All of them

were suffused with malicism. The dark energy was seeping out everywhere. It seemed that most of the malicism had already found its way out of the bag and that the flow had mostly subsided. There was still a tremendous amount of malicism inside, though, and if anyone were to *take* an item from the bag it would almost certainly come with a generous helping of the stuff. It was quite a dangerous little thing.

There is, of course, an explanation for this. The properties of malicism make it easily absorbed by gems of all sorts, including magic gems. The vast number of gems in the Dark Citadel's treasury were kept not only as treasure but also to prevent the concentration of malicism in the Dark Citadel from becoming too high by absorbing the excess. Even Infernal-tier demons would start to feel under the weather if the malicism was too thick, so you can understand why such precaution must be taken. By sheer dumb luck, Hero Gold-Hair had picked out an assemblage of some of the most malicism-saturated gems in the whole treasury.

"So, basically you're saying that there was enough malicism coming out of this bag to corrupt his will and turn him into a monster?" Flio glanced at the monster who was now lying motionless on the ground. "Well, whatever the case, we can't just leave him like this." He raised his right arm.

Tsuya, thinking Flio meant to finish Gold-Hair off, interposed herself between them in a panic. "We're sooo, sooo soooorry!" she shouted, spreading her arms as wide as she could to protect him. "Pleaaaaase let him go!"

The voice seemed to rouse the monster. He slowly raised his head. He picked Tsuya up, holding her tight, and deposited her behind him. Then he stood, giving Flio a defiant look. Some subconscious part of him seemed to be trying to protect Tsuya, even with his will corrupted by the malicism.

Flio, however, smiled kindly at the beast. "Don't worry," he said. "I'm not gonna kill him." He raised both arms, and a large magic circle appeared above Hero Gold-Hair's head. The circle sucked the malicism out of his body with astonishing force. It looked like black smoke. Without the corrupting influence, Hero Gold-Hair's body became gradually smaller and smaller before finally returning to its original human form, stark naked. His body was still battered and injured from his fight with Rys. Even his pretty face was badly beaten up.

"Ohhhh!" Tsuya ran up to him. She took off her cloak and wrapped it around Hero Gold-Hair, covering his body. "You're back to

noormal!" she wept. "Thank the gods!"

Flio glanced at the couple, and then turned his attention back to the Bottomless Bag. The inside was saturated enough with malicism that it would take even him two or three days to purify it completely. Corruption this thorough would take one hundred of Klyrode's best mages fifty years to cleanse.

I probably should hold on to this for now, Flio thought. He turned back towards Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya. "Excuse me," he said, "would you let me have this bag for two or three days? I could—"

Hero Gold-Hair was clutching his head in pain. His response was curt. "Keep it."

"Oh, but—"

"Keep it. You can do whatever you want with the thing." He pulled himself to his unsteady feet and began to walk deeper into the forest. Tsuya hurried to his side.

"W-Well, then at least let me pay you for it..." Flio said, taking a bag of coins out from his own Bottomless Bag and offering it to Hero Gold-Hair.

But the man was obstinate. "I told you already. Just keep it," he said and turned to leave.

A second later he turned back. Supporting himself by leaning on Tsuya's shoulder, he hobbled up to Flio with a defeated look on his face. "Actually..." he said. "I'll take enough money to buy underwear. No, clothes. I mean clothes." He stuck his hand in the bag of money Flio had offered and withdrew a scant handful of coins which he stuck in his cloak's pockets. Then the two of them vanished into the forest.

Flio watched the two leave, then walked up to Rys, who had returned to her humanoid form. "My lord," she said dubiously, "who exactly was that man? If he is with the Dark Army, the wise thing to do might be to kill him before he does something worse."

"Hm..." Flio crossed his arms and lowered his head in thought. "He was under the effects of malicism, so it's hard to be sure, but I *feel* like I've met him somewhere before..." Flio would normally be able to recognize Hero Gold-Hair, but with his face messed up from his battle with Rys, he hadn't noticed who it was. "That said, I didn't get the sense that he was a bad person."

"You didn't?"

"Yeah. I mean, it looked like he cares a lot about the woman who was with him."

"You think so...?" Rys gently grabbed hold of Flio's arm. "Then I suppose that is that," she said, pressing her head against his shoulder. They stayed like that for a short while.

"Okay," said Flio, "are you ready to get back to our hot springs

vacation?"

"I very much am, my lord husband," said Rys. Flio smiled at her words.

◇Kinosaki Hot Springs Village◇

Flio and Rys teleported back to Kinosaki Village and walked to the inn on foot. When they got there, they found a large sign set up by the entrance. Rys's eyes went wide, and she froze on the spot. "What...?"

The sign read:

*Hot Springs are presently closed for repairs due to monster attack —
Kinosaki Hot Springs Association.*

Rys's face twitched. "This... This is... My lord husband, with... With your magic you could fix this in a snap...r-right?" She looked pleadingly up at her husband, her voice shaking.

"I don't know..." said Flio. "I'll help of course, but for something on this scale it might take two or three days...maybe even a bit longer. It's looking like we might have to postpone our hot springs trip..."

Rys's expression was one of absolute despair. "I *knew* we should have killed that man..." she murmured through her clenched teeth.

◇Kinosaki Hot Springs Village—One Week Later◇

A week later, Flio and Rys returned to the Kinosaki Hot Springs. This time, they brought along Balirossa, Blossom, Byleri, Belano, and Hiya. For the past week, Flio and Rys had been healing people injured in the attack and helping with repairs. In thanks, the Kinosaki Hot Springs Association had offered them a free stay for their entire household.

"Our household is actually fairly large..." Flio had said, but the chairman of the association was insistent.

"As far as any of us are concerned," they said, "anyone in your household is part of our family after all the help you've given us!"

And so, Flio brought all five along with himself and Rys. Rys had been unhappy at first, saying, "Are we not going to be alone together, then?" but she was mollified when she heard that she and her husband would be given a private room.

"It is a pity, though," said Balirossa. "I had hoped that Sir Ghozal and Ser Uliminas would be able to join us..."

"It is too bad," said Flio. "It sounds like there was some kind of emergency with one of Uliminas's former subordinates..."

Blossom ran up to the pair, interrupting before Balirossa could respond. "Hey, Balirossa!" she said. "I thought you couldn't *stand* Mister Ghozal! Don't tell me you're coming around?" She nudged her

friend in the side with her elbow.

Balirossa's face went bright red. "D-Don't be absurd!" she stammered. "Of course not! I-I just, perhaps, we are after all living under the same roof, you see... At the very least I should show some concern for them!"

"Ohhh?" Blossom teased. "Is that *really* all that's going on?"

"Hrm..." said Balirossa. "What *exactly* are you suggesting I feel then, Blossom?"

Byleri and Hiya joined in on pestering Balirossa as Belano silently poked her on her back. "O-Okay! That's enough!" she said, covering her face with her hands and running off. "L-Leave me aloooone!"

Flio draped his arm over Rys's shoulders as she watched their antics with amusement. "Have the Silent Listeners been having trouble finding new employment...?" he wondered.

"So I have heard," said Rys. "It sounds like people are slow to trust them since they have no personal history they can reveal."

"If only they could use their demonic abilities openly... They'd have no trouble finding employment with *that* sort of demonstration. But right now they have to worry about being caught by Klyrode's demon sensors. I might not be able to protect them if that happens..."

When Ghozal and Uliminas left the Dark Army, all thirty of the elite Silent Listeners who used to work as spies directly under Uliminas quit in a show of support for their commander. They took human forms and set out for human cities to try to find new employment, but nobody was willing to hire a stranger with an uncertain background.

Some time ago, the former King Klyrode, fed up with the Silent Listeners skulking around in his kingdom, issued a proclamation for shopkeepers not to employ anyone who couldn't adequately prove their personal history owing to the possibility of spies. In a sense, then, the Silent Listeners were reaping what they had sown.

Flio rested his jaw in his hand, deep in thought. "My lord husband?" asked Rys, "what is the matter?"

"Oh, nothing," he said. "I just have something on my mind..." He gave Rys one of his smiles. "It can wait until we get home. Today, let's just enjoy the hot springs."

"Okay!" Rys grinned back at her husband and the pair walked arm in arm into the village.



Thanks in large part to Flio's and Rys's efforts, the village had been completely repaired. "Wow!" said Blossom, looking all around

her. "A monster really tore this place apart a week ago? I would have never guessed."

"Right?" said Byleri. "Like, there are tons of customers too... It's hard to believe, y'know?" She was glancing around as well, taking in everything with wide, excited eyes.

"I can sense some lingering malicium," said Hiya, "but even that is faint... The Exalted One and his wife were here, after all. It is no surprise to see such a thorough reconstruction. I am impressed as ever." Hiya bowed deeply as they walked behind Flio.

"It was nothing, really," said Flio, shaking his head. He couldn't quite suppress a wry grin. "The people of Kinosaki did most of the work. Rys and I just helped."

Rys gazed in admiration at Flio. *Most of the demons I've known would have taken all the credit for themselves*, she thought. *My husband is so modest... He's an amazing man.* She gave Flio's arm a squeeze, her cheeks reddening.

Belano was walking along in the middle of the group, looking around with a map open in her hands. She stopped and pointed out a large building in front of them. "That's the inn," she said in her usual small voice. Flio stopped and looked with her.

"It seems like a good place to stay," said Rys. Everyone nodded. It was the biggest building around, and there was steam rising up everywhere. It truly looked like the very image of hot springs.

Flio and Rys led the rest into the building, where quite a number of workers were lined up in two lines on either side of them.

"Welcome to Kinosaki!" they all said at once.

"Wow!" said Byleri. "Like, what are those clothes everyone's wearing? I've never seen anything like them!"

"Those are kimono," said Belano. "My colleague from the East wears them too."

"Yeah? Kimono, huh?" Byleri nodded.

Flio's party chattered among themselves as they looked all around. Then, a girl stepped out of the line in front of them and bowed. "Welcome again to Kinosaki Hot Springs," she said. "Shall I show you to the front desk?"

"Thank you," said Flio. "It's good to be here."

The girl led Flio and Rys along, the rest of them following close behind. "Please sign your name in the guest book," she said, smiling coquettishly. Flio scribbled out their information with a pen. Rys, meanwhile, was fidgeting nervously. She gestured to the girl, beckoning her close. "Is there something you need, miss?"

"Yes, well... I was wondering if you could tell me something..." Rys cupped her hand around the girl's ear to whisper. "Where is the

spring that helps couples have children?" Her voice was quiet but extremely serious.

The girl smiled and nodded her head, and then took a map out from the sleeve of her kimono. She quietly handed it over and brought her own hand up to Rys's ear to whisper back. "The childbirth spring is an outdoor bath," she said. "That map will show you where to find it. I wish you luck." She gave her a thumbs-up. Rys nodded seriously.

After Flio had finished recording everyone's names in the guest book, he handed over his ticket. "There might be two more joining us later," he said. "Their names are Ghozal and Ulimina—" the moment the words left his mouth, Rys rushed up to his side.

"My lord, have you finished? Shall we go to our room?" She was speaking fast, not letting Flio get a word in. "Come on, let's go! Let's go, let's go, let's go!" She seized him by the arm and began to drag him off.

"Lord Flio!" cried Blossom. "Wait a moment!" She rushed after the pair, everyone else following. In her hurry, she bumped into a large man with reddish-black skin who seemed to be waiting for his turn at the front desk. "Oh! Sorry!" she said, lowering her head and raising her right arm in a gesture of apology.

The man, however, was angry when he looked at Blossom. "Hmmm?!" He reached out towards her.

"Wah?" Blossom was startled at his reaction and thoughtlessly started to bring her hands up to a guard.

"Wait." A woman standing beside the big man put her hand on his and pushed it back down. With her other hand, she adjusted the glasses she was wearing. "Now, run." she said.

"A-Aah! I'm so sorry!" Blossom bowed her head again and again and ran off down the hallway after Balirossa and the others.

The man clicked his tongue in irritation. "What was *that*, Phufun?!" he bellowed. "You're letting that woman go?! A lower life-form like that deserves *death* for bumping into me!" Phufun pressed her finger against his lips, signaling him to keep quiet. "Ngh, wha?!"

"Master..." she said, "we didn't come here to fight. Don't lose sight of our objective..." Yuigarde's anger didn't seem to be abating, so Phufun leaned in to whisper. "Master," she said, "listen. All of the top ranking members of the Dark Army are here, taking these loathsome human forms. All for the sake of Operation: Vacation. Our objective is to deepen the trust between the Dark One and the ranking officers and to raise the morale of their soldiers. Understand? If we start a fight and are kicked out of the inn, this mission will end in failure."

"B-But," stammered Yuigarde, "that's so damn *convoluted!* We should just turn back into demons and conquer this village! Bring it

under our control!"

"How many times must I tell you? This place... These *hot springs*, they call it, are in the south of Klyrode, on the opposite side of the Dark Citadel. If we conquered it, it wouldn't take long for the Klyrode army to arrive. That's why our primary objective here is morale and trust."

"H-Hrm..."

"And these being *human* hot springs means everyone can *cut loose*, and not worry about *rank* or *standing*. So let's just try to blend—"

"Um... Sir? Miss?" The two of them were pressing their heads close together, urgently whispering, when the girl from earlier spoke up.

The pair shot up at once. "Yes?!" they said, their voices cracking.

"U-Um, would you write your names in the guest book? There are people waiting behind you..."

"O-Oh, yes, I'm terribly sorry..." Phufun did her absolute best to keep calm, pressing her glasses up on the bridge of her nose as she turned to look at the front desk.

A little ways away stood a group watching Yuigarde and Phufun closely. These were the officers who had come to participate in Operation: Vacation. They had sealed their demonic abilities in order to fool the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode's security and had taken human forms. It must be said, however, that the men in particular looked somewhat excessively burly. They looked very strange, looming over the inn lobby. They were certainly attracting attention.

"I have heard that thiss hot spring is good for the ssskin," said Yorminyt of the Infernal Four. "I am mossst eager to sssee for myssself." She nervously ran her hands over her cheeks and arms.

"And we can drink all we like!" said the Infernal Sleip with a hearty laugh. "I'm starting as soon as we get to our rooms." He was drooling.

"Is the food good, yes? Yes, good food?" queried their colleague Hugi-Mugi. They were originally a two-headed doppeladler bird, but today they had taken the form of two humans. The two spoke as one. "We can eat much, yes? Fill our stomachs, yes? Yes, we are hungry!" They each placed an arm on the other's shoulder and danced cheerfully in anticipation.

The rest of the officers were smiling happily, chattering and laughing and cheering, waiting for Yuigarde and Phufun to finish.

Meanwhile, Phufun was hovering in front of the guest book, racking her brains in clear agony. *What name this time...?* Of course, it wouldn't do to write down the real names of the members of the Dark Army. Phufun had been writing down some human-sounding aliases,

but after the sixteenth name she found that she couldn't think of any more.

◇Somewhere in Kinosaki Village—Part 1◇

Hiya had left Flio's company and gone to wander alone through the hot springs village. In their hand they held the guide map they had obtained from the inn's front desk. They kept staring at a part of the map as they looked around. *This building... The Museum of Erotic Art. If my information is correct, they have books and sculptures from around the world, ancient and modern, all pertaining to erotic practices. They have many rare items on display and in their collection. I would very much like to see them for myself.*

Hiya, the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, had been alive for many, many years. They knew much of the history of the world and of magical lore, but only a little about sex. When they swore fealty to Flio and began to live with him, though, they found themselves fascinated by Flio and Rys's intimate love-making and became positively greedy for knowledge about sex and sexuality, which until now they had largely ignored.

"Shopkeeper," they said, addressing someone behind the counter at a souvenir stand. "I wish to ask you a question. May I trouble you?"

"Hm? What is it?"

"I seek the building known as the 'Museum of Erotic Art.' Do you know where it is?"

As Hiya was asking for directions, they heard a voice behind them. "Like, um, excuse me? Do you know where this building is?"

"Oh!" said whoever the voice was talking to. "The Museum of Erotic Art?"

"Aah! You don't have to, like, say it so loud?"

"That voice..." Hiya turned around. There, standing now in front of them, was Byleri. She had been asking directions from the stall opposite of them. Byleri's face was red. She had been trying to ask without saying the building's name, but the woman she was talking to had no reservations about blurting it out. "Oh?" said Hiya.

"Haweh?!" said Byleri. Hiya was mildly surprised to encounter Byleri here, but Byleri's face became even redder. It was positively crimson.

"Miss Byleri," Hiya said. "You seek the Museum of Erotic Art?"

"N-No! I, uh, I... I'm looking for, like, something else?"

"What strange happenstance," they continued, unperturbed. "I, too, am bound for the Museum of Erotic Art."

"You got it wrong!" said Byleri. "See, um... I, like..."

"Since we have found each other like this, shall we enjoy the Museum of Erotic Art together, until we are truly satisfied?"

“No! I, like... I can enjoy it myself? In secret? Oh, no, um, I mean...”

The two carried on like this for a while, until they learned that sadly, the museum was closed for the day.

◇Somewhere in Kinosaki Village—Part 2◇

Rys wasted no time. The second her luggage was in her room she hurried to change into the yukata that had been prepared for her. “My love! I’m going to the hot springs! The Yanagi Bath—the childbearing one!” She grabbed Flio by the hand and led him off, repeating those words like a mantra.

The Kinosaki Hot Springs contained seven springs, each with their own properties. The most famous attraction was the outdoor walking course, where guests could stroll from hot spring to hot spring. Rys headed directly for one of these: the Yanagi Bath. She had already started taking off her yukata as she approached.

“Okay!” she said. “Let’s go in, my love! Together! Let’s get all of the childbearing water we can!” She pulled her husband along with her into the women’s bath. The staff at the hot spring ran up to stop them, harried looks on their faces.

“E-Excuse me, miss? Sir?” said one attendant. “This isn’t mixed bathing... Could your husband please go to the men’s bath area?”

Rys turned towards the attendant, fury written on her face. “This is for my future happiness! If you dare to stand in my way—” There was a *thunk*. Flio had straightened his hand like a knife and struck Rys on the head in the middle of her sentence, sending her crumpling to the ground.

Flio turned to the staff, looking thoroughly mortified. “Sorry about all that,” he said. “We’ll follow the rules, so don’t worry.” He bowed his head several times. Then he turned to his wife. “Rys,” he said, “I understand how you feel, but you have to follow the rules. Now, I’ll go to the men’s bath, and you can go to the women’s. Okay?”

“Yes, my lord husband...” Rys mumbled. It seemed like she had recovered her consciousness after blacking out from Flio’s attack. “I apologize profusely...”

◇Kinosaki Hot Springs Village—Inn◇

“Oh, this is delicious!” Balirossa cried as she took a bite of the lunch the inn had provided for them.

“Yeah,” said Belano between bites of seafood. “It’s good.” Belano was usually a light eater, but here she was shoveling dish after dish into her mouth.

“The food’s great, but the drinks are *something else*,” said Blossom.

She was drinking straight from the bottle and laughing boisterously next to them. There were five in total sharing the room: Balirossa, Blossom, Byleri, Belano, and Hiya. While the rest were out exploring the village, Balirossa, Blossom, and Belano had stayed behind for lunch.

“But you know,” Blossom continued, “with food this good, it’s a shame we didn’t bring Sybe along with us.” She looked wistful as she took a bite of grilled fish, her face red from the alcohol.

“Well,” said Balirossa, “Sybe *is* an animal. The inn has a strict policy on pets, I’m afraid. It simply wasn’t possible.” She reached out with her fork towards her small portable dining table, aiming for the dead center, but then she stopped, her eyes widening. “Hm? What happened to my egg rolls?”

“What do you mean ‘what happened’? Maybe you ate ‘em all without thinking.”

“No, that can’t be! They looked so delicious, I had resolved to leave them for last.” She started picking up the plates on her table one at a time, looking under them as if she thought an egg roll might be hiding there somehow.

“Ah, well,” said Blossom. “Here, I’ll give you one of mine, so... Wait, what?” Blossom’s eyes went wide as well. She was certain she hadn’t eaten her egg rolls either, but they were nowhere to be seen.

“Oh,” said Belano, interrupting suddenly. She pointed at something underneath Blossom’s table. “What’s that?”

Blossom picked the table up. There, before their eyes, was Sybe. The unicorn rabbit was lying on its side, munching single-mindedly on an egg roll.

“Sybe...what are you doing here?” Blossom was puzzled. “Weren’t you watching the house while we...” she trailed off as her eyes landed on her own luggage. One of the bags was open. Blossom furrowed her brow. “Did you sneak into my luggage, Sybe...?”

Sybe ignored her and continued to eat.

Blossom, Balirossa, and Belano took Sybe to the landlady to explain the situation and apologize.

“Make sure it stays in your room,” the landlady said. “We don’t want to let it bother the other guests.”

And so Sybe was allowed to stay with just the one condition.

◇The Inn—Banquet Hall◇

The demons from the Dark Army who had come to participate in the hot springs party were staying in the banquet hall of the inn. The hope was that by eating and sleeping together, they would be able to deepen their bonds of friendship. Lunch had started as soon as they

arrived, but...

"If you do that again," said the landlady, her smile as cold as ice, "you are to leave my inn immediately. Am I understood?" The officers of the Dark Army with Yuigarde at their head were sitting on their knees with their heads lowered, looking thoroughly chastised.

To learn what had happened, we must go back in time to when the Dark Army first arrived. They had immediately descended on the food and began to eat.

Yuigarde was eating happily. "Well!" he exclaimed. "Human food isn't half bad, is it!" as he spoke, he brought a bottle to his lips to drink.

"Yesss, indeed," said Yorminyt. "Their liquor isss quite good as well." She sighed contentedly. She was wearing her yukata half-open, her body hot from the alcohol. A number of the demons around her were staring, unable to look away from her voluptuous figure.

"We need more drinks!" Sleip bellowed as he finished off his tenth bottle. "We need a cask! Bring us a cask! Gwah ha ha ha ha!"

"Hooray! Food, yes! Drink, yes! Yes, delicious!" Next to Sleip, Hugi-Mugi's two bodies were positively inhaling food and alcohol, alternating which one was drinking and which was eating.

Spirits were high with Yuigarde and the three surviving Infernals. And how could they not be, with such delicious food and such good drinks? They poured drinks for each other, ate to their hearts' content, and made merry. Perhaps they were being somewhat *too* noisy, but on the whole it had the atmosphere of a good party.

Suddenly, Yuigarde took to his feet. He was completely and utterly drunk. "Now *this* is a feast!" he cried. "Entertainment! Someone give us a show! Let's get things going!" He gave a loud, boisterous laugh.

One of the officers sprung to his feet. "By your leave, allow me!" he said, and began a strange, writhing dance.

Yuigarde's demeanor suddenly flipped. No longer laughing, he looked sternly at the dancing officer. "What's that ugly dance supposed to be?!" he snapped. "It just looks like you got your magic sucked out! Show me something better!" The Dark One picked up a bottle that had fallen by his feet and tossed it violently at the demon. It struck him in the face and shattered.

Shards of broken glass were stuck in the officer's face, the dregs of alcohol that had been left in the bottle running down his chin. "That *hurts*, you son of a bitch!" he shouted, and charged straight for Yuigarde.

Yuigarde was indignant. "Hmmm? How dare you speak that way to me?! I'm the Dark One!"

“Who cares?!” he shot back. “I ain’t afraid of you!” He reached out to grab at Yuigarde.

“And who are *you*?!” Yuigarde’s arm shot out, clutching at the demon’s throat. “I’ll *teach* you to fear me!” The two suddenly started grappling, tumbling and rolling and struggling all through the room.

“No! My drinksss!”

“You lowlives! You knocked over my cask!”

“Ah! You stepped on us, yes! Yes, we have been stepped on! This will not stand, yes!”

As the two grappled their way through the crowded banquet hall, more and more victims cried out as they trampled on their meals and knocked over their drinks. Enraged, the rest of the demons joined the brawl. It was a scene that would not have been out of place in the pits of Hell itself. The brawl quickly overstepped its bounds. Not only did they demolish their own room, but another banquet room on the same floor fell victim to their rampage.

When she heard the commotion, the landlady of the inn called for security and went with them to suppress the fight. The inn’s security force of mostly demihumans were pressed to handle the situation, but they managed to get the brawl under control and obtained an account of what had happened.

And now the landlady stood staring at the Dark Army, Yuigarde at the front. They were sitting quietly like school children. She gave them another icy smile. “We will charge you for repairs and for bothering the other guests when you leave. See that it doesn’t happen again, or else you are no longer welcome here.” With that last stern reminder, she left the room.

Yuigarde stared out the door after her. “She’s pretty tough, that woman...” he said. Before the landlady’s wrath, Yuigarde had found himself making his big body as small as possible, nervous sweat running down his face.

The door opened again, and Phufun entered. For a second, she froze, her eyes darting around the banquet hall. “What... What in the hells happened while I was using the toilet?!” She surveyed the broken room and the officers of the Dark Army kneeling quietly, and with a shaking hand, she pressed her glasses up on the bridge of her nose.

◇The Yanagi Bath◇

The day was coming to a close. The sun had started to sink beyond the horizon. Rys, who had come into the bath at noon, was still soaking in the water. She had gone back to the inn at one point to eat lunch with Flio, but the moment she had finished her food, she dashed out and came back to the bath as fast as she could.

“Babies... Babies... My husband’s precious babies...” She was chanting those words under her breath, her eyes closed as she soaked in the bath. She was visualizing herself as a mother. In her imagination, she had just given birth to her second set of triplets and was being congratulated by Flio and her older children. Her jaw was slack as she sat there, lost in her reverie imagining her rose-tinted image of the future. She didn’t show any sign of ever getting up.

Flio was in the waiting area, sitting on a chair. He was starting to get tired. He glanced in the direction of the women’s baths. “I guess Rys still isn’t done...” Grimacing, he slowly took to his feet and made his way to the men’s side of the bath. “Well then, I guess I’d better get back in. Gotta keep her company.”

◇Kinosaki Hot Springs Village—Inn◇

“If it isn’t Ghozal! And Uliminas?” Flio had returned to the inn to find Ghozal and Uliminas standing by the entryway. He greeted them happily.

“Mister Flio!” said Ghozal when he noticed them. “And Rys! Good to see you!” Flio and Ghozal shared a friendly smile. Uliminas, who had been clinging to Ghozal’s arm, quickly let go and stepped away. Rys grinned at her behavior.

“Oh, don’t mind us, Uliminas,” she said. “If you care for Ghozal, it’s no problem at all if you—”

Uliminas went red and pressed Ghozal’s ears shut with her hands. “I-I-I-I-I—I—” she stammered, loudly.

“Fool!” Ghozal scowled. “Don’t be so loud! You’ll bother people!”

Uliminas deflated. “Meow... I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” said Ghozal. “Just be careful.” He grabbed Uliminas’s shoulder and pulled her back in close. Then he turned to look at Flio and Rys. “We’re done with our business, more or less, so here we are. I hope it’s no trouble.”

“Not at all!” said Flio. “I’m glad your business went well!”

Flio gave them a big smile, but Ghozal and Uliminas looked glum. “Hrm,” said Ghozal. “Well, I wouldn’t exactly say it went well.”

“There’s meowlways next time...” said Uliminas.

Ghozal and Uliminas had told Flio before they left that they were going to help Uliminas’s former subordinates, the Silent Listeners, with their re-employment. *I guess it’s not going great*, Flio thought. He chided himself for carelessly assuming it had gone well. He grew lost in his thoughts. He lowered his head, bringing his hand up to rest on his jaw.

“My husband?” Rys looked over at Flio, tilting her neck curiously. “Is something the matter?”

Flio nodded to himself, and then looked up at Rys. “No, I’m all

right, Rys,” he said. “Thanks for worrying about me.”

“Truly? Then, I suppose that is fine...”

Flio and Rys continued to talk as they led Ghozal and Uliminas inside to the front desk of the inn. “Excuse me,” said Flio, “we’d like to rent another room...”

The girl behind the desk looked contrite. “Oh... I’m terribly sorry, but there was a bit of *trouble* earlier. We don’t have any more rooms available...”

“Trouble?” asked Flio.

“Yes... There was a bit of a commotion on the banquet hall floor... Unfortunately, the rooms on that floor aren’t in usable condition right now. We had to move all of the guests staying there to rooms on other floors, you see...”

“Okay, I understand,” said Flio. “Sorry to bother you.” He stepped away from the desk when suddenly he heard a loud voice behind him.

“That’s it! Leave, and don’t come back!” A woman Flio took to be the landlady was facing the entryway, her kimono sleeves tucked up, screaming furiously. She was surrounded on all sides not only by the inn’s security, but by the village’s guards. The landlady and security were forcing a great number of guests out of the inn one after another.

Outside, Flio could hear a man’s deep voice. “Shaddap! I’m the one canceling my reservation!”

The woman swung her arms in a rage. “Boulders! Hit them with every boulder you have!”

“Yes, ma’am!” A number of the demihuman guards were carrying large boulders, which they hurled out the door with all the strength they could muster. A chorus of screams and protests came from outside.

“That hurtsss! I can’t fight properly in thiss body!”

“Wretch! Just let me have a bit more to drink!”

“It hurts, yes! Yes, it hurts!”

Eventually, the voices grew quiet. The last they could hear was the first man shouting from afar, “I’ll remember this!”

When they were gone, the landlady let down her sleeves. “Now,” she ordered the guards again, “go tidy up the front of the inn. I expect it to be immaculate!”

“Yes, ma’am!” At her instructions, the guards took up brooms and trash bags and rushed outside to begin cleaning up. The landlady sighed.

“Honestly,” she murmured, clearly deeply annoyed, “those have got to be the *worst* guests we’ve ever had...to think they’d start not one but *two* drunken brawls...” Then she noticed Flio standing in the middle of the room, staring at the commotion. She quickly brought her kimono sleeve up to cover her face. “O-Oh, goodness me, sir! I’m

afraid I made you see something dreadful!" She affected a high, feminine laugh as she walked up to Flio and his party. "Was there something our special guests needed?" she asked the troubled-looking girl at the front desk.

"Oh, y-yes!" she said. "More of their party arrived, and they were asking if there was another room available..."

The landlady clapped her hands. "Well, that's just perfect! As of this moment we have a *number* of empty rooms on the third floor, if you'll follow me." Then she leaned in close to Flio's face, and whispered. "And in exchange for this little favor, do keep what you saw just now between us, will you?" Flio nodded, a dry smile on his face.

Next to Flio, Ghozal, Uliminas and Rys were staring at the door. "Those people..." said Ghozal.

"It felt like I recognized them somemeow..." said Uliminas. "Like they were people I used to see meowll the time..."

"How strange, Uliminas," said Rys. "I had the same thought."

The three demons looked between each other. "Well," said Rys, "the only thing we're here for today is the hot springs."

"You're right," said Uliminas. "Purrobably best to purrtend we didn't notice."

"Hrm. Very well," said Ghozal. "I don't know what their plans are, but if they cause problems here I can deal with it then." All three nodded emphatically.

"Hey you three," Flio called to them, "the room's ready!"

"Yes, my lord husband! I'm coming!" Rys ran up to her husband as Ghozal and Uliminas followed along behind.

The next day, portraits of the offenders were sent to every inn in Kinosaki Village, with instructions to not let the people depicted lodge in any inn in town. Nobody had any idea, however, that they had been the Dark One himself and the ranking officers of the Dark Army.

◇Kinosaki Hot Springs Village◇

With Ghozal and Uliminas now among their numbers, Flio and his companions finished up their dinners in the great hall and headed out once more. Only Blossom stayed behind in the room to keep an eye on Sybe. Rys took the lead and led the party to one outdoor bath in particular.

Flio grimaced when he saw where they had ended up. Rys had brought them to the Yanagi bath—the bath for couples hoping for children—as if it were the most obvious and natural thing in the world. Rys signed herself in as fast as she could and was naked and in the bath before anyone could get a word in. Once again she started to

mutter, “Babies... Babies... My husband’s precious babies,” visualizing her success in her mind.

“So *this* is what mew call a hot spring?” Uliminas looked around curiously at her surroundings as she went to the changing room and took off her clothes.

“Is this your first time, Ser Uliminas?” asked Balirossa.

“Yeah. I’ve heard of hot springs, but there aren’t any around the Dark Citadel. And I’m not a big fan of baths in the furrst place.” Uliminas kept watching Balirossa out of the corner of her eye as the two changed. *She has a nicer body than I expected...* she thought, seething internally just a little. *And her face is something else. Dammewt, no wonder Ghozal is so head over heels.*

Just as she was thinking that, Ghozal appeared suddenly in front of her eyes. Ghozal, who by all appearances had just teleported onto the scene, held his right hand out. “There you are, Uliminas,” he said. “I think I forgot my towel. Give me another.” He was stark naked. The women, who would not have expected Ghozal to suddenly materialize in their wildest dreams, were mostly naked themselves.

It took Uliminas a little while to wrap her head around what was happening. After a moment of staring blankly, she grabbed her own towel from the basket and half-tossed it onto Ghozal’s face. She jumped up on his shoulders and wrapped the towel tight around his eyes like a blindfold. “Get back to the men’s bath, you mewscrant!” she shouted, launching off his shoulders with a kick.

“Hrm,” he said. “Pardon me.” Ghozal, acting like Uliminas’s anger had nothing to do with him, laughed and vanished from the spot as suddenly as he came.

There were other women in the changing room, but because Ghozal had gone so quickly, nobody was quite sure what had happened.

“Wasn’t there a man standing there?” asked one woman.

“I don’t see a man...” replied another.

Uliminas, for her part, led the party into the bath, acting for all the world like nothing had happened. *I am going to KILL that man*, she thought, grinding her teeth.

“Ghozal,” said Flio, “the baths are split into male and female sections. You gotta watch out for that.”

“I see, so that’s what all the fuss was about. I’ve never been somewhere like this, you know.” Ghozal laughed heartily at his mistake as he got in the bath next to Flio, one hand behind his head in an expression of mild contrition.

They soaked in the bath until they had had enough, and later met back up in the waiting area outside the changing rooms.

“Mewncompoop!” Uliminas shouted when she saw Ghozal, kicking him again and again as she scolded him. “What made you do something that stupid?! I’ll kill mew!”

It was hard to tell from Ghozal’s expression if he understood what he had done wrong. He kept lightly apologizing, laughing the whole time. “Yeah, sorry, sorry, my bad.”

Rys, incidentally, was left behind in the bath, still soaking. In her mind, she was already on her fifteenth child.

“This is great though,” said Ghozal, grinning as the Far Eastern geta sandals he had been given to wear clapped on the pavement. “Going around to different hot springs like this... This is the life.” His grinning face showed no trace at all of the Dark One he had once been.

Uliminas looked at Ghozal’s face, her own expression complicated. *He never made a face like that when he was the Dark Meown... she thought. He always looked so serious... Intense, even...* Uliminas had nothing but respect for Gholl the Dark One. She had just about worshipped him. He had been ever proud, ever strong, ever becoming of his station. It had been that Gholl that Uliminas had fallen in love with. She had been overjoyed whenever Gholl had ordered her to attend him for the night, but as his vassal, she kept those feelings buried deep, taking care to never let them show on her face.

I miss those days when Gholl was the Dark Meown... Uliminas turned her head again to look intensely at him. He was grinning happily with his whole face. *But this new cheerful Ghozal isn’t bad either...* Slowly, Uliminas too began to smile.

“Oh, Ser Balirossa,” said Ghozal, suddenly breaking Uliminas out of her reverie. “Your bath-soaked skin shines so beautifully!”

“Huh?!” Balirossa started in confusion, her face quickly turning red. “Wh-What brought *this* on?!” Ghozal kept smiling at her as she struggled to control herself.

That meathead! Uliminas stomped on Ghozal’s foot and glared at him. Ghozal looked surprised more than anything as she stomped and stomped, her cheeks puffed out indignantly.

“Hey, hey! What’s gotten into you, Uliminas?!”

“Mew knows! Think it over meowrself!”

Afterwards, Flio and company went around one at a time to the other six outdoor hot springs in the village. Ghozal kept in mind what he had been taught about men’s and women’s changing areas and was careful not to cause any more scenes. When they finished bathing they met up with Rys, who had stayed in the Yanagi bath right up until closing time, and together they all headed back to the inn.

“Hey! Welcome back!” Blossom, whom they had left standing watch, had just gotten into the small indoor bath in their room when they arrived. This bath was set on the veranda, so in a way it was also an outdoor bath. Sybe, in its unicorn rabbit form, was in the bath with her.

“Hey, Blossom? Are we allowed to, like, let Sybe in the bath?”

“Yeah, I checked with the landlady when she came to bring us drinks. She said it was okay!” Blossom pointed to the middle of the room where a prodigious number of bottles and snack foods were set out. It seemed Blossom had ordered them so that the rest of the party could indulge when they got back from the baths.

“Well, like, that’s great then!” Byleri’s words made Blossom grin happily. Next to her, Sybe pulled itself onto the rim of the bathtub with its two forepaws, shaking itself dry.

“Right!” called Ghozal. “Now that we’re back, let’s get to drinking!” He grabbed a bottle from the offering in the middle of the room.

“Yes, after all, Blossom went to the trouble of—” Rys cut herself off. Flio, who was sitting next to Ghozal, had reached out to grab a bottle. “Oh, my lord husband, allow me.” She pulled his hand away and grabbed a cup and a bottle herself, placing the cup in his hand and pouring a drink for him with a smile on her face. “Here, my lord.”

“Thank you, Rys. Here, I’ll pour you a cup too.” Flio took the bottle from his wife and brought it to her own cup to pour, smiling back at her.

“Why, thank you!” said Rys, still beaming.

Belano, who had been sitting across from Flio and Rys, started to blush as she watched. “They really are great together...” she muttered, guzzling down her own cup.

“Yeah...” said Byleri, beaming at the couple. “They’re, like, amazing? Like, I wanna be like that with *my* husband someday, y’know?” She took a deep drink herself.

“I see,” said Hiya, who was standing behind Byleri and openly staring. “Then the book in your possession was for—”

“*Hiya!*” Byleri covered their mouth with both hands, her face quite red. “Like, *not another word*, okay? A-Anyway, like, drink with us! Maybe drink enough to forget all about that book...” Byleri forced a cup into Hiya’s hands and started to pour them a drink.

Hiya smirked at Byleri’s behavior. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” they said. “A wife’s duties are quite important, Miss Byleri. For you to have taken such an interest—”

“Drink! *Drink!* You, like, haven’t had enough, Hiya! You gotta drink more!” Byleri held the bottle up in front of Hiya, interrupting

and hurrying the djinn on.

Ghozal, sitting across from Byleri and Hiya, drained his cup with a single gulp. "Hrm," he said. "Demon liquor is the best, but the stuff humans make isn't half bad."

"One hundred purrcent," said Uliminas. Her face was already red from inebriation as she drained her cup. She and Ghozal were both extremely heavy drinkers, practically inhaling the stuff.

Next to Ghozal, directly across Uliminas, Balirossa sat putting just a little distance between herself and the former Dark One, her back curled up, staring at the ground and trying to be as small as possible as she nibbled on snacks. Her cheeks were red. *Why did I sit here? I just can't bring myself to relax next to Sir G-Ghozal...*

"Aaah, what a bath!" Blossom, who had come out of the bath on the veranda, came up next to Balirossa. She was already very drunk after having a few drinks during her bath. Her face was ruddy and she had neglected both to tie the belt of her yukata and to put on her underwear. Each step she took left her yukata wide open, her naked lower body fully visible.

Balirossa blushed redder when she noticed Blossom's state of undress. She took her friend's yukata in her hands and shut it, tying it as tight as she could. "Wh-What are you doing! Sir Ghozal and Sir Flio are here! You shouldn't display yourself in such a way even to members of your *own* sex!"

"Aha ha," Blossom laughed, "what's the big deal? You're too stiff sometimes, Balirossa." As she spoke, Blossom lay on her side, resting her head on Balirossa's lap.

"H-Hey! Excuse me?!" exclaimed Balirossa.

Blossom paid no heed to Balirossa's protests. "Hey, hey, seriously, don't worry about it!" she said as she started to doze off using Balirossa as a pillow. Sybe, who had also gotten out of the bath, ran up to them and plopped down on top, resting on Blossom's stomach.

Ghozal looked over at the pile and frowned. "What's going on over there?" he asked.

"O-Oh!" Balirossa responded, somehow growing even redder. "It's just bonding, I suppose! Or horseplay, perhaps... See Blossom?" she added in an aside to the woman on her lap. "Even Ghozal's astonished at your behavior!"

"Hrm," said Ghozal, nodding his head. "Bonding, is it...? Perhaps I should try it. Uliminas, I'll borrow your lap." He lay down without missing a beat, resting his head on Uliminas's lap.

"Meow? Wha—" Uliminas blushed in confusion at Ghozal's sudden behavior. "Wait! What is *wrong* with mew?! There's horseplay and then there's *horseplay*!" She punched the much larger man in the face as hard as she could. Even in a human body, however, Ghozal's

toughness was legendary. Her fists did absolutely nothing. No matter how hard she punched, he wouldn't move an inch.

"Hrm. This is actually pretty comfortable," said Ghozal. "Aha ha ha ha!"

"Just do what mew like," Uliminas spat. "I don't care." She took another bottle and drained it almost instantly.

Rys, who had been staring at Uliminas and Ghozal, put a hand on her husband's shoulder. "Shall we follow suit, my love?" she said, gesturing towards her own lap.

"Well...are you sure? I don't want to bother anyone."

"I'm sure. Everyone else is doing it, after all." She smiled, her cheeks red.

"A-All right," said Flio, also blushing a little as he placed his head down on Rys's lap. "I guess there's no reason not to..."

Rys adjusted her legs to make sure Flio wasn't uncomfortable, and began to gently stroke his hair as he lay in her lap. "My lord husband... I hope you are enjoying yourself?"

"I am," he said, smiling up at her. "I'm a little embarrassed, but it is nice..."

Belano and Byleri shared a look. "They're so intimate..." mused Belano. "I'm a bit jealous."

"Like, me too? I want a husband who makes me wanna do stuff like that, y'know?" The two stood up and began to head in the direction of the veranda.

"Oh? Where are you going?" Hiya called after them, sipping a cup of alcohol.

Byleri and Belano both turned their heads at once. "The bath," said Belano.

"Like, I wanna try the bath here, y'know? I can't deal with all this stuff."

The two took off their yukatas and got in the bath that Blossom and Sybe had just vacated.

"Well, I suppose that's one way to relieve tension," said Hiya, smiling with the corner of their mouth as they stared at the pair.

Hiya could hear a woman's voice in their head. *Perhaps you'd like to use my lap too, Your Divinity.*

Hah. Damalynas, they responded, perhaps I will, later.

Excellent! Hiya could feel the happy anticipation in Damalynas's voice.

Damalynas, known as the Grand Magus of Midnight, was once defeated by Hiya and absorbed into their mental world. They had begun using her as a training partner in that world in the interest of satisfying their intellectual curiosity (primarily as pertains to sex). At

first they had forced her, but over time, Damalynas had come to enjoy her role as Hiya's loyal servant.

Flio looked around the room, his head resting in Rys's lap. Ghozal, he saw, had moved his head to Balirossa's lap and was smiling happily. Blossom and Sybe were cuddling on Uliminas's. Uliminas's fists were clenched, but she was giggling. Belano and Byleri were happily humming some tune together in the bath while Hiya leaned against the wall, smiling vacantly. Everyone seemed to be having a good time.

"I'm glad that everyone can have fun together like this sometimes," he said.

"Me too." Rys nodded. "It's a good thing." Then she brought her own face close to Flio's. "But, my lord husband, I'm also looking forward to our time alone. I have taken a considerable amount of the childbearing water..." She gave him a flirtatious grin.

The following morning the group met up with Flio and Rys, who had gone to their private room to sleep, and went to the inn's front desk to check out.

Rys was beaming next to Flio as he wrote their information in the guest book. "I had a wonderful time, my lord husband. We *must* come again."

Behind the couple, Uliminas was clinging to Ghozal's arm, her legs wobbling unsteadily. "*Honestly*," said Ghozal, "if your legs are falling asleep...next time, *tell me!*" Last night, Ghozal had ended up falling asleep on Uliminas's lap where he had lain until morning. Uliminas was forced to stay kneeling with her legs tucked under her until her legs fell asleep so badly that she couldn't walk.

"Y-Yeah?! And mew's fault is that?! *Huh?!!*" Uliminas's face was red from embarrassment. She punched Ghozal's arm with all her strength, but Ghozal, who boasted the most durable body of all demonkind, just laughed, unperturbed by her attack.

"Ahh," Blossom sighed. "I haven't been this hungover in a while..."

"You as well, Blossom?" said Balirossa. "Alas, I fear that I might be hungover as well."

"Yeah? Like, even Balirossa, huh?" said Byleri. "It feels like there's a whole parade in my head..."

Belano moaned and said nothing. She was clutching her aching head. All four of them were plainly hungover, massaging their foreheads or temples and moaning pitifully.

"My, my," said Hiya. "The four of you still need training." They cradled Sybe in their arms and smiled.

Damalynas spoke in Hiya's mind. *I-I'm very sorry, Your Divinity, for being unable to see your training through to the end...*

Oh, no, Damalynas, Hiya responded. *You were quite adorable last night.*

Hee hee... I-I was?

Distracted by the conversation with Damalynas, Hiya went silent, smiling absently. In their arms Sybe was wiggling its ears, happy to have been given all the egg rolls it could eat for breakfast that morning.

Finally, Flio returned. "Well, that's done with. Ready to head back?" Everyone nodded in unison and they left the inn, the landlady and the workers waving them goodbye. After walking for a ways, Flio raised his right arm and conjured a magic circle. A second, larger magic circle appeared on the ground, and from it, a magic door. Flio opened the door and everyone could see the familiar sight of home on the other side. They went through single file, Flio at the head, and returned home from their vacation.

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

A few days after the hot springs vacation, a mysterious wooden crate appeared in the kitchen. "Rys, what are these yellow fruits?" Flio asked when he looked inside. It was packed full of a fruit he had never seen before.

Rys grinned. "My lord husband," she said, "these are called *lembons*, famed for their acidity."

"Acidity? So they're sour fruits? Not for dessert, I'm guessing. What are you making?"

Rys shook her head. "I'm afraid you are mistaken, my lord husband. We may have a need for them in the near future, so I thought it wise to have them on hand." A blush crept onto her cheeks. "You see, um, I read in a book that p-pregnant women sometimes have cravings for sour foods, so—" Rys swallowed the words that were on the tip of her tongue.

"So you thought it would be a good way to tell if you were pregnant, waiting to see if you started to crave lembons," Flio said, smirking. "I... I see."

"I bathed in so much of the childbirth water, and you've doted on me so much, I *must* be... Hee hee." Rys grinned and giggled, and the two kept on talking.

Chapter 5: The Former Dark One and the Two Fox Sisters

◇A Forest in the West◇

A man and a woman walked alone together through the thick undergrowth. “And?” said the man. “So this shrine is where they sealed that sword? What was it...the *Champion’s Edge*?”

“Yes, my Lord Hero Gold-Haaair! I took a part-time job in a bar in the last city, riiight? I heard all about it from this party of adventurers who were gonna come take it! I’m sure this is the plaaace!” Tsuya straightened her back and proudly thumped her chest with her fist. Hero Gold-Hair, walking beside her, nodded emphatically.

“I see! Then we just have to beat those adventurers to the punch! No time to waste! We’ll take that sword out from under their noses!”

“Yes, Hero Gold-Haaair!”

Hero Gold-Hair began to walk faster. Tsuya was still following behind with a smile on her face. *If I can get my hands on that sword, I’m sure it will give me incredible power! I’ll show all those fools in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode not to dismiss me!*

◇Klyrode Castle—The Maiden Queen’s Office◇

The Maiden Queen sat back in her chair, an expression of complete exhaustion on her face. She had taken over rule of the kingdom from her father, the former king, but the more she learned about the state he had left the country in, the more aghast and overwhelmed she felt.

It started with the kingdom’s finances. The expenditure paperwork was in complete disorder to begin with. Even after she had deciphered it, she found that nearly a fifth of the kingdom’s wealth had disappeared without any legal record, spent on who-knows-what by who-knows-whom. The Maiden Queen had deemed this a matter worthy of attention and summoned her finance officials to hear their account of the situation.

The officials seemed agitated as they spoke. “I’m terribly, terribly sorry, Your Majesty,” one said. “The former King Klyrode, you see, handled most of his expenditures through a private accounting firm... Even we don’t know the details of how he spent it.”

The Maiden Queen worked with the information her finance officials provided to set their records in order as best they could, and also sent for the former king's private accountants to appear in front of her court. However, it seemed that the accountants in question had fled the castle when the King was deposed and were gone without a trace.

She had tracked down what few former members of the firm she could find, but what they told her left her even further aghast. "Yeah, what we mostly did was set up a secret fund for the old king. He kinda did whatever he wanted with the money, but most of it went into, like, his own private capital reserve. I got no idea where he's hid it, though."

With the accountant's testimony, the Queen ordered the former King Klyrode to appear in court and testify, but the villa to which he was sent to live out his retirement was found empty, the former King's whereabouts unknown. She had assigned guards to watch over him, but "When he came to," they said, "he told us he wished to go for a walk. Somehow during his stroll he managed to vanish on us." With this information, the Queen declared her father a fugitive from justice and gave orders to the soldiers throughout the country to arrest him on sight.

At the same time as this was going on, the Queen was working night and day with her finance officials to double-check the past paperwork and put it back in order as it should be. However, the more she investigated, the more irregularities she found from her father's dubious accounting, and the greater the scope of the damage to her kingdom became.

The Maiden Queen clutched her head, overwhelmed by it all. "And to do this during a time when preparations for war with the Dark Army were paramount... Father, what in the world were you thinking?" She looked over the piles of papers scattered on her desk: reports on the former king's misconduct. She sighed deeply. "No," she said to herself, "he is no father of mine. He is a miserable old bastard, and it would have been best for all of us had he died."

◇Houghtow City—Hysui General Store◇

"Fakes?" Flio was surprised by the news that Hysui, the troubled store owner, had told him.

"Yes," said Hysui. "There have been lots of cases lately—merchandise in Houghtow City vanishing, replaced with inferior-quality fakes. It's even happened at my shop, much to my shame." He pointed to a wooden box by his feet. It was packed full of potions, but when Flio looked, almost all of the flasks were cracked. The contents

were leaking out, and they didn't look at all their proper color. Whatever was inside these flasks was more like muddy ditch-water. It was obvious at a glance that they were fakes.

"More than half of the stores in the shopping district have been targeted like that. As you can imagine, it's causing everyone a bit of a headache. All you can really do is keep a careful eye on your merchandise. You never know when it will be swapped out with rubbish like this." Hysui sighed.

"Do we know where these things had come from originally?" asked Flio.

"Yes, about that," said Hysui. "It seems like they were mixed in with merchandise from wholesalers in the major cities—in bundles of excess stock. Because of the way they're bundled together, there's no way to tell which shop is supplying the fakes."

"I see. And overstock is gonna go for cheap... You can't separate out the merchandise in each box?"

"Well, see, the way it works is that the entire wholesale market will bundle their surplus together and, after checking the contents, place it all in a box. And it's always bundles of the same item, which makes it even harder to identify the criminal." As Hysui spoke, Flio strolled up to where Hysui had set the box full of fake potions. He reached out towards the box with his right hand, and a magic circle appeared before his palm. It slowly expanded until it enveloped the whole of the box.

Whatever Flio's magic circle told him, it made him look up in shock. "Huh?!"

◇A Building Somewhere—Basement Room◇

In a dimly lit room, a man lounged back in his lavish armchair as he smoked a cigar. The door opened and one of his underlings entered. The man turned his head in their direction and spoke. "Tell me," he said, "are the wholesalers moving our goods along properly?"

"Yes, sir. Everything is proceeding according to plan. Our goods are selling out with the fakes hidden amongst them."

The man nodded, satisfied, and took another draw of his cigar. "And they would never imagine that there are illusion spells cast on the boxes themselves."

The underling shook his head. "Concealment is a high-level spell. Too high for any mage most in our profession can employ. But if we get sloppy even once, someone is sure to track us down. Perhaps it's time to switch to a different wholesaler?"

"Perhaps." The man brought the cigar to his mouth and took a long, luxuriant smoke.

"And...there is another thing, Master."

“Hm? Speak your mind.”

“I think we had best meet with our friends from the west sooner rather than later...”

The man pondered at length. “Very well,” he said. “Then let us not waste time. Go, and bring them to me.”

◇Near a Building Somewhere◇

Boralis, captain of the Maiden Queen’s royal guard, moved out of sight through the back alleys, deeper into the city, until she came upon a certain building. “Is this it?” she said. Her company of knights following behind her—all women—drew their weapons, ready to attack at a moment’s notice.

One of the knights stepped forward. “This is it, Lady Boralis. I’m certain. The headquarters of the merchant company we suspect of being behind the fake merchandise.”

“And *his* stronghold...” Boralis pursed her lips and gestured: a single wave. “Let’s move. And be careful. Not a single sound.” Boralis led the way, edging along the building’s wall towards her target. Her knights surrounded the entrance. Again, Boralis signaled wordlessly with her hand, and the knights burst in the building at once.

A guillotine blade flew down from the ceiling of the corridor Boralis had been about to enter. “Whoa!” She sprung back, dodging the lethal instrument by a hair. She looked behind her. Her knights were unhurt. She gave them a signal, making a precise shape with her hand, and the knights drew back, allowing the witches in their party to come to the front with Boralis.

“They’ve trapped the place,” said Boralis. “You stay behind me and scan ahead with magic. Keep a sharp eye out.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“The rest of you, follow after the magic users. I’ll take the front.” With that, she stood up in the middle of the hallway. “I think we can assume from our welcome that they know we’re here. Let’s move fast.”

“Yes ma’am!”

Boralis took off running down the corridor. Her witches used the spell Scan, locating most of the traps before they became an issue. Thanks to their efforts, Boralis’s company made their way unimpeded.

Unimpeded, that is, until a group of demihumans—bodyguards, perhaps—blocked their way, rushing in to attack.

Boralis at the head, the knights tried to force their adversaries back, but more attackers kept coming from the side or from behind, popping in from corridors or out of rooms. The royal guard pressed on valiantly, but more and more of their number were becoming injured.

Finally, they had reached the lowest basement level. “Is this as deep as it goes?!”

“Yes, ma’am!” said a knight, looking over the building’s blueprints they had acquired and comparing it to their surroundings. Boralis nodded.

“All knights, *forward!*” Boralis unstrapped the great shield from her back and readied it to bash through the door like a battering ram. She struck once! Twice! And the third strike splintered it to pieces. Boralis led the knights through the broken door and into the room ahead of them.

The room was empty, save for an unconscious man bound to a chair in the center.

One of the knights went to get a closer look. “Lady Boralis... Isn’t that man our informant?”

Boralis grit her teeth. “They got away. Damn them!”

◇A Room in a Different Building◇

A man smoked a cigar as he peered into a large crystal ball. Inside the orb, he could see Boralis and her knights as they continued their search of the basement. He had been watching them from beginning to end. Next to him was a woman wearing a silver cheongsam cut with deep slits. “It is as you said. Had we been but half an hour later in our escape, that knight woman would have caught us.”

The woman chuckled and then yipped, “But of course! Your protection is assured...so long as you keep your end of the deal. We signed a contract, after all.”

The man turned away from the crystal ball to face her. She was quite the beauty, although she hadn’t stopped chuckling. “I understand full well. I give you my word that we will sneak into Klyrode Castle and take the item your people desire. And you will provide us with protection?”

The woman stopped chuckling just long enough to say, “For our future prosperity, then!” and once again she yipped.

“Hrm. For our future prosperity.”

They shook hands, and both began to laugh.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

The Dark One Yuigarde cried out, anger in his voice. “What are those layabouts *doing?*! Phufun! Tell me!” When Yuigarde had first ascended to the throne, more or less all of the peoples living near the Dark Citadel sent emissaries to publicly declare their loyalty. However, the chiefs of the demons in the west had yet to send word.

“I’m sorry, Master,” said Phufun. She was kneeling before him and pressing her head to the floor. “We’ve sent our own emissaries demanding an explanation, so if you could wait a little longer...”

Yuigarde folded his arms and glared at Phufun, clearly displeased. Then he looked up at the ceiling, giving the matter some thought. *Those western bastards were always unruly, even when my brother was in charge...* He lowered his head to look back down at Phufun. “Hey, those chiefs are foxes, right?”

“Indeed. The demon fox sisters Kintsuno the Gold and Gintsuno the Silver.”

“Ahh, I remember them! They’re that cowardly pair who’s always up to cheap tricks!” Yuigarde looked annoyed just at being made to remember their faces. “This stinks.”

Phufun suddenly looked up, pressed her fake glasses up on the ridge of her nose, and immediately started sniffing at her own body. “I... I stink, Master? But I take a bath every day...”

“What?! Who the hell said we were talking about you?!” Yuigarde cocked his fist and punched her with his full strength, mercilessly driving her face into the floor. “It’s them! Those abysmal sisters are *plotting* something, you useless succubus!” Having said his piece, Yuigarde sank back down onto his throne.

Phufun’s face was still buried in the floor, her body not even twitching. *Aaaah, Master... This is it. The sweet pain... So strong that I can barely hold on to my consciousness... I can hardly endure it!* Beneath the floor her face was red, her breath heavy. Even among succubi, Phufun was an extreme masochist.

◇Houghtow City—Hysui General Store◇

“It sounds like that group got the better of the castle’s knights,” said Flio.

Hysui nodded slowly, his expression strained. “There must be a spy,” he said. “These are some of the best knights in the kingdom, directly under the command of Her Majesty the Maiden Queen. If *they* can’t manage to catch up to them...” But then Hysui raised his face. “*But*,” he said, “it’s been a few days since we’ve had problems with fakes, thanks to the knights who broke up one of their bases.” Hysui smiled cheerfully, and Flio smiled back.

“This Concealment spell, though,” Hysui continued, “which is supposed to be so high level, and with the sheer *quantity* of goods, and in such a short time too... Whoever’s behind this must have quite a number of mages in their employ. High-level ones, at that.” The other day, when Flio had examined the fake merchandise using magic, he found traces of the spell Concealment on the items. He had told the Houghtow Merchants’ Guild, who in turn relayed the information to Klyrode Castle. “There isn’t much for us to do here other than hope the knights get it under control.”

“I suppose.” For a second, the two fell into awkward silence.

“Oh, that’s right!” said Hysui, striking his palm with his fist. “Mister Flio, we have your usual in stock!” He pointed to a crate in one of the corners of the shop. Flio put on a strained smile. “But those lembon fruits... You’ve been buying so many of them. Can I ask what you’re using them for?”

Just as Hysui had said, the box was full of lembons. Rys had been imposing on Flio to buy them for her just in case her pregnancy gave her cravings and her initial purchase proved insufficient. “Ah,” said Flio. “Well, you see...”

Unable to bring himself to tell the truth, that they were precautions for his wife’s pregnancy, Flio trailed off. All he could do was give Hysui a very forced smile.

◇Klyrode Castle—Sanctuary◇

Several days had passed since the raid on the mysterious malefactor’s base. It was the middle of the night, and Boralis was running for all she was worth.

“Hurry!” she shouted. “Don’t let them get away!” Running along behind her came her company of knights. Not long ago she had received a report that the castle sanctuary was under attack by unknown persons and readied herself for combat as fast as she could, rushing to the scene.

“How did they get in?!” asked one of her knights. “What is the night guard doing?!”

Boralis spat on the floor, her eyes narrowed in irritation. “It *seems* that they were able to get in through one of the secret passages.”

“A secret passage? But only the royal family should know how to find them!”

Boralis hissed, her irritation rising still further. *This is his handiwork*, she thought. *It has to be. Of course a former royal would know of the secret passages...* She turned to her knights. “We can worry about that later! For now, dedicate everything you have to catching the thieves. Hurry! In the name of Klyrode!”

“Yes, ma’am!” they responded in unison.

They arrived in the sanctuary just in time to see the culprits making an escape through a secret passage. “Don’t let them get away!” shouted Boralis, drawing her sword. “After me!” Shouting a furious battle cry, she charged at her enemies and joined the battle.

The first light of dawn was breaking over the horizon as the clash drew to a close. Boralis surveyed the thieves they had captured, bound tightly on the ground. “We were able to capture some of them,” she said, “so I suppose we must call this a victory.” She did not, however, look particularly triumphant. She fixed her captives with a

contemptuous glare and sighed throatily in irritation.

“All right,” Boralis said, “make sure they’re properly restrained. I don’t want to give any of them an opportunity to kill themselves. When Her Majesty awakens, we’ll bring them before her for questioning.” A few of her knights approached the thieves to properly arrest them while Boralis watched on, her arms folded.

“Lady Boralis,” one of her knights approached.

“Yes? What is it?”

“The bureaucrats are done looking over the sanctuary. I’m sorry to say, but the thieves made off with a number of the castle’s treasures.”

Boralis brought her hand to her face. For a second she was silent. “Make a list of the stolen items,” she ordered. “We’ll include it in our report to Her Majesty the Maiden Queen this morning.”

“Understood,” said the knight, and went back into the sanctuary. Boralis watched her go with a bitter expression.

“Your Majesty...” she said. “Please, forgive me for my weakness...and my failure.”

◇Klyrode Castle Town—A Basement◇

A man on an extravagant chair shook the ash from his cigar. “And? Were you successful?”

“Yes, for the most part. We were able to retrieve the treasures they wanted, but...well, the knights were faster to react than we had anticipated. A number of our men have been taken prisoner.”

The man narrowed his eyes at his underling’s report. “Captured by mere knights,” he said. “Pitiful.” He clicked his tongue and took a long draw of his cigar. “Well, no matter. We’ve fulfilled our contract with the demons. I can’t say I care for their attitude towards humanity—they don’t even try to disguise their contempt. But their protection is exactly what we need.” The man smirked as he brought his cigar to his lips. “At least until our organization has achieved its completed form.”

He laughed, his low chuckle muffled by the cigar in his mouth, and turned to look at his subordinate. “You. Take our plundered treasure where it’s meant to go. We aren’t far from the castle, so don’t draw attention to yourself.”

“Understood. I will make preparations immediately.”

“Oh, yes,” said the man, remembering something, “and don’t forget to attach this to the crate, so they can recognize it.” He took out a hair ornament styled after a fox’s tail.

“Understood.” The subordinate took the ornament, bowed once, and hurried out of the room.

Alone, the man nursed his cigar and once again laughed in a low voice. “Disguised by our Concealment spell, the spoils will leave the

castle along with goods from the city wholesalers and reach the hands of our *friends*. There will be no need for us to incur the risk of carrying stolen goods through Klyrode's intelligence network ourselves." He looked up at the ceiling. "I can't show my face in public anymore, but who cares. I've had my fill of dealing with the allied army, inquiring after everyone's readiness, keeping an eye on the enemy... As long as I can keep making money, I need nothing else. And now—now there is no reason for me to restrain myself."

The man cackled again and again.

◇Klyrode Castle—Throne Room◇

"I knew it." The Maiden Queen glared at the men Boralis had brought to her, a tortured expression on her face. These, of course, were the unidentified thieves who stole from the castle sanctuary.

"The companions of these men removed a number of treasures from the castle. We will have to learn where the treasures are headed and how they intend to use them, but first we should make them confess to their crimes." Boralis stood tall at attention as she reported to the Queen.

But Her Majesty was not listening to Boralis's words. She was staring at the thieves' faces. She bit her lower lip, realizing that she had seen these men before. They had once been the personal guards of her father—the former king. When King Klyrode was deposed, they were among those exiled from the castle as accomplices.

"You...worked for my father..."

This removes all doubt, the Queen thought. *My father is involved in this affair. In which case, we need not wonder how they were able to make use of the secret passageways.* Boralis was speaking, but the Queen's mind was somewhere else, furiously considering her next course of action.

◇Klyrode Castle Town—Wholesalers' Market◇

The wholesalers' market in the Klyrode Castle Town was the largest in the whole kingdom. That is to say, they handled a huge number of goods dealt by a huge number of traders. And in the underground storerooms of the wholesalers' market, a huge number of items awaited inspection. Items were given a brief inspection when they passed through the city gates, and because it wasn't against the rules for merchants to carry their goods into the storehouse themselves, there were also a number of those who used the storehouse as a place to hand off items to other members of their organization.

"Right, put that here."

“Got it—” the man carrying the box cut himself off. “Oof!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, uh, s-sorry, sir! I bumped a box and knocked something off...”

“Is that all? Well, put it back on!”

“Y-Yessir!” The man gulped. “Wh-Which box was it again? Was it this one?”

A worker for the market leaned their head in and shouted. “Hurry it up, you two! We got new merchandise coming in!”

“Got it!” shouted back the man’s superior. “Hey, we gotta go!” he added.

“Yessir...”

The two hurried out of the storeroom and into the crowd outside. A woman followed by several others walked in, each wearing a cloak with the hood pulled up that concealed their faces. There were many others milling around in the area, however, so their appearance didn’t attract much attention.

“I have to admit,” said the woman, “that old human man knows what he’s doing. A dead drop in the wholesalers’ market... In other words, he’s making it *our* problem to get it out of the city.” She let out a squeaky bark, then chuckled as she made her way through the crowd of humans. Eventually she reached a corner of the storeroom and approached a particularly disorganized pile of boxes. A hair ornament fashioned after a fox’s tail was attached to one of them.

A grin came to the woman’s face. “Here, this one! This is ours,” she yipped. The woman casually waved her hand, and the men who had been waiting behind her came up around the pile and got to work. Each man took one box, and left in the direction they came. She snickered as she watched on. “Not the *hardest* job we’ve ever done.” With that, she followed the men out and vanished into the crowd.

“Hysui General Store’s goods were around here, I think.” A middle-aged man—an official working for the wholesalers’ market—led another man along into the warehouse. “You know,” he added, “I don’t think I’ve seen you before. Are you a new employee?”

“Oh, no,” said Flio. “I just happened to have business with the market office. Mister Hysui asked me to pick up some items for him while I was here.” He pulled a document out of his Bottomless Bag and handed it to the official.

“Hm. I see. Mister Flio, representing the Hysui General Store. I’m sorry to have doubted you; it’s just that lately there’s been some shady group using this place to send illicit goods to each other. We’re all a little on guard at the moment.”

“Illicit goods? What sort?”

“I wouldn’t repeat this too loudly if I were you, but they’re fencing stolen goods, distributing to black markets... That sort of thing.”

“Ah,” said Flio, “I see.”

As they spoke, they drew close to a certain corner where a messy pile of boxes sat in a heap. “Oh, here we are,” said the official. “The boxes all look the same, you know. I almost walked right on by!” He tapped one of the boxes with his fist for emphasis. “Looks like they’ve been inspected already. You’re free to take them.”

“Thank you for your help,” said Flio. “Now...” Flio focused and in an instant the boxes were transferred inside his Bottomless Bag.

“I believe there’s another inspection point at the city gates, but show them this and they should let you through.” The official handed Flio a slip of paper. It read: “Notice of Delivery.”

“I see.” Flio reached out to shake the man’s hand. “Then I’ll be off,” he said, and he too left and joined the crowd outside.

◇Klyrode Castle Town—A Building Somewhere◇

The woman took off her heavy cloak to reveal a silver cheongsam underneath. “I found it!” she yipped, pulling the fox tail hair pin out.

Another woman sat in a chair before her, wearing a golden cheongsam with deep slits cut on the sides. She was smiling like a fox in a henhouse.

“I can hardly believe we would find one of our people’s hidden treasures in the sanctuary of Klyrode Castle,” the second woman said. She stood and walked up to the box, allowing herself a yip. “Now we have all three.”

“And now there is nothing that Yuigarde has to make us swear allegiance to him,” the woman in the silver cheongsam said. “I’ve had about enough of him.”

The two shared a look and both started snickering at once. “Oh, I heard that one of Yuigarde’s emissaries showed up at the stronghold demanding an explanation,” said the woman in gold. “But now we have a pretext to drive him away.”

“And if they show up again,” said the woman in silver as she placed a hand on the box, “we can come out to meet them—with the armies of the western demons at our back!” She howled with excitement.

“With one of the three Hidden Treasures of the Fox Clan, lost to us in our grandfather’s day: the Eastern Wind!”

“The legendary magic fan, said to conjure winds so great as to extinguish dragon fire!”

“Let’s see it!” both of them shouted at once, yipping with jubilation. Together, they wrenched open the lid.

“Yip?” said the woman in gold.

“Yip yip?” said the woman in silver.

What the two saw when they opened the box made them both stop still in shock.

“What...are these yellow things?”

“Are they...fruits?” The woman in gold picked one up and took a big bite out of it. “Ack! Sour!” she squealed. “These are lembons!”

“They’re *what*?! Why?!” The two shared another look and then stared into the box, but it was still full to bursting with nothing but lembons.

“W-We got the wrong box,” said the woman in gold. “It must be in one of the other boxes.”

“Y-Yes, you’re right! This one must be camouflage.” The two shared a laugh and moved on to the next box, and the next, and the next. But all they found inside were lembons, lembons, and lembons. When they got to the last box, the woman in gold flipped it over just to check that it really was nothing but lembons. It really was.

She screamed in a rage and threw the box to the floor with a violent crash. “That *human*! Is this a *joke*?! Did he betray us?! Is he making an enemy of me, Kintsuno the Gold?!”

“We have to question him!” said the other. “If he can’t explain this, I, Gintsuno the Silver, will eat him alive!”

Both sisters had anger written on their faces. Indeed, they were so enraged that they lost control of their magic and lost their human forms, reverting back to their true faces as demon foxes.

◇Houghtow City—Hysui General Store◇

Hysui was shocked. “What? Why is *that* in here...?” He tilted his head to the side as he checked the contents of the box.

Flio peered into the box over Hysui’s shoulder. “Hm? Is that not what’s supposed to be in there?” Inside the box was a large object wrapped in many layers of cloth.

“This order’s supposed to be all lembons...”

“A-Ah!” exclaimed Flio, sensing that Rys had put in yet another order. “You...don’t say.” He grimaced. “I assumed it was some kind of magic item. But if you didn’t order it, then what in the world...?”

Hysui could only stare, dumbfounded.

◇Klyrode Castle Town—A Building Somewhere◇

“What? Are you serious?” The demon fox Gintsuno the Silver’s tail bristled as she glared daggers at the man sitting in the lavish chair.

“Your minions messed up and now the Eastern Wind is out somewhere?” She yipped furiously. All around, the mercenaries that

the former King Klyrode had brought for his security were bloodied and lying on the floor.

Even under the force of Gintsuno's glare, the former King smoked luxuriantly. "That's the only explanation I can think of. We fulfilled our promise to you. We stole your damned treasure from the castle and delivered it to the underground storeroom, your mark attached. Perhaps the contents ended up switched somehow, or there was some other absurd misadventure."

"Oh? How nice. Or are you just blowing smoke?!" Gintsuno brought her claws dangerously close to the former King's face.

"Gintsuno, that's enough."

"B-But, sister!"

Kintsuno the Gold, in human form, jumped down off her little sister's back and approached the former King. "Is what you said the truth?"

"It is. I swear it." The former King Klyrode held out a sheet of paper, handing it to Kintsuno.

"What's this?" Kintsuno yipped.

"It's a list of where the boxes near ours were to be delivered to. If there was some mishap, you'll most likely figure it out at one of these places."

"Oh? You're well prepared."

"Of course I am. You know I value my life." He took another puff. "This one's going to some run-of-the-mill general store in Houghtow: 'Hysui General Store.' And the next is—"

Kintsuno yipped and held a hand over the former King's mouth, interrupting him. "We'll do the recovery ourselves. I'd hate to have another *mishap*."

He clicked his tongue in clear irritation. "Understood," he said. "I'll leave you to it."

"And," added Kintsuno, "we expect compensation for the trouble. We'll be by to pick it up once we have the treasure."

Kintsuno ran out of the room with her sister turning to her human form and following.

"Godsdamned nuisances," the former King Klyrode grumbled and clicked his tongue again and again, staring out the door through which the demon fox sisters had left.

◇Houghtow City—Hisui General Store◇

When they heard about the strange item, Uliminas, Ghozal, and Balirossa came to Hysui's shop to have a look, and were now looking down into the box.

"It's not something mew see everyday, that's fur sure..." Uliminas

took the thing in her hands, its cloth wrappings now removed. It was a fan, radiant with color. The leaf was made out of beautiful rainbow-colored feathers, and it was set with an uncommonly large magic gem in the pivot—the unmistakable hallmark of a magic item. In all, it was almost three times as large as a human's head.

"I cast Apurraise Item, but all I got was 'analysis failed,'" said Uliminas, slumping her shoulders. "It's hidden by a really powerful Concealment spell."

Balirossa nodded at Uliminas and turned to Ghozal. "Sir Ghozal, would your magic fare any better?"

Ghozal shook his head. "When it comes to appraisal magic, Uliminas is better than I am. If she can't do it, I can't either." Balirossa folded her arms and looked curiously at the fan.

Flio also looked a little confused as he turned to Ghozal. "Even I can't get much. Just its name: the Eastern Wind. When I check the other categories, it asks me for proof of ownership."

"Oh?" Ghozal sounded impressed. "Well, good thing we had Mister Flio here to tell us that much, but...the Eastern Wind, was it? I feel like I've heard that name before..." he closed his eyes tight, thinking hard.

Balirossa stared at the fan. "But that makes it only stranger to have found it in a wholesaler market!" she said. "I don't believe you can order something even Sir Ghozal and Lord Flio can't analyze from a catalog." The others nodded in agreement.

"It's purruliar, that's fur sure," said Uliminas. "Purrhaps we should send it to the castle?"

"Oh, I'm afraid that's not allowed," a woman's voice yipped from the doorway. "Not after we worked so hard to steal it *away* from there!" Everyone turned to look at once and saw two women standing there. Gholl and Uliminas's eyes widened in shock when they realized who they were.

"You're the demon fox sisters, aren't you?" said Gholl.

"No mewstaking it," said Uliminas. "That's them. The chiefs of the western demeowns."

"My," said Kintsuno. "It seems these humans know of us, sister."

"They could be from the west?" Gintsuno replied. "All the humans there are our slaves."

Ghozal and Uliminas gave each other a look as the sisters started to yip and laugh. The two of them had hidden their true forms with a high level Concealment spell. Well enough, it seemed, that the demon foxes seemed to have no idea that the humans before them were the former Dark One Gholl and his confederate Uliminas. Ghozal and Uliminas, on the other hand, knew all sorts of details about the demons they governed back in those days. They had recognized the

foxes' human forms immediately.

"That belongs to us," yipped Kintsuno, "so hand it over!"

"If you give it back, we'll let you be," said Gintsuno. They were both standing with one leg exposed through the slits in their cheongsams: Kintsuno her right leg, and Gintsuno her left. They chuckled again, and of course yipped.

As the foxes talked and posed, Uliminas sent a telepathic message to Flio. *These two are raring for a fight. They're not gonna want to leave witnesses...*

Flio looked behind him where Hysui and Balirossa were standing. *Well, first we should get the humans to safety...* But he didn't have time to complete his thought before Balirossa drew her sword, dashing past him to face the demons.

"Fiends!" she declared, facing Kintsuno and bringing her sword to a guard. "What treachery are you plotting?" She glared at them both.

Ghozal was staring openly at Balirossa. *Hrm... he thought. Her stance is so beautiful.* He gazed in admiration, giving no sign he recognized the danger of the situation.

Uliminas glanced to her side at Ghozal, her mouth agape. *Don't tell me... she thought, that meowron is purrobably thinking something like, "Hrm... Her stance is so beautiful."* She hissed.

Uliminas probably had *too* good of a read on Ghozal.

Meanwhile, the fox sisters faced Balirossa. "Well, well," said Kintsuno. She sounded somewhat impressed. "A human, pointing a sword at me. You've certainly got some nerve, girl." Kintsuno glanced at Gintsuno, who reached into her Bottomless Bag and retrieved an item that looked something like a gourd. She removed the lid.

"Who are you, girl?" asked Gintsuno. "Take it as a token of respect for your courage that we would ask your name."

"I am a knight in the service of Lord Flio!" Balirossa declared. "My name is Balirossa!"

Gintsuno pointed the gourd at the knight. "Balirossa!" she cried.

"What?!" Balirossa cried back in a loud voice. But the next second, Balirossa's whole body was sucked into the gourd. It happened in the blink of an eye. Flio, Ghozal, and Uliminas looked on in shock. Hysui fainted.

The Scouring Gourd that Gintsuno was holding was one of the hidden treasures of the fox clan. To use it, one must open the lid and call out the name of the person in front of them. If that person were to respond, their body would be sucked into the gourd itself, ground down and dissolved into magic wine.

"Aha ha," Gintsuno laughed, yipping triumphantly. "Such a gallant knight will make for some excellent wine." She shook the

gourd and snickered.

◇A Mountain in the West◇

At last, Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya reached the sealed shrine. They opened the door, took the treasure by force, and now they stood outside after Gold-Hair had equipped their spoils. “Hey, Tsuya,” he said. “We were looking for the *Champion’s Edge*, right? But this is clearly armor...” He was wearing jet-black armor on his upper body and looked quite confused.

“Hmmm... Well, I’m suuure this is the right place,” said Tsuya. “I bet the adventurers just got it confused.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, I’m suuure! But Hero Gold-Haaair, that armor looks good on you!” Hiya grinned happily.

Hero Gold-Hair blushed a little and rubbed under his nose. “R-Really?!”

“Yeaah!”

“It’s pretty comfortable too... Now, let’s see how its abilities are...” Hero Gold-Hair opened his own status window to check his condition and glanced at his equipment. “Hm?”

“What’s wrooong?”

“Hold on, Tsuya... This isn’t the ‘Champion’s Armor’—it’s the ‘Cambion’s Armor’!”

“Whaaat?! What did you saaay?! Cambions are bad news! Don’t tell me it’s cuuursed!”

Suddenly, Hero Gold-Hair fell silent.

“H-Hero Gold-Haaair?” Tsuya asked. No response. “Heero Gold-Haaair?” Gold-Hair still said nothing. Tsuya blinked and tilted her head, concerned. And then, Gold-Hair suddenly started to scream.

“GWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!” he howled to the sky.

“Oh, oh nooo! Hero Gold-Haaair?!” Tsuya was frantic. The armor seemed to be emitting a dark smoke as Hero Gold-Hair grew before her eyes, becoming a huge monster with a golden mohawk.

Tsuya scrambled up onto him and managed to cling to his mohawk. “Oh nooo! Hooow could this haaappen?!” she wailed. “Hero Gooold-Hair, stay strooong!” Crying, she desperately kept shouting as Gold-Hair charged off into the mountains.

◇Houghtow City—Hysui General Store◇

Gintsuno shook the gourd in her hand, chuckling. “For a mere human, she’s good enough to celebrate with before we head off to fight the Dark One!” she yipped.

Kintsuno was keeping an eye on her sister and an eye on Flio’s

party. “Now, hand it over if you don’t want to end up like your friend. If you do—” Suddenly, Ghozal was inches away from her face.

“Huh?” she and her sister yipped in unison.

A second later, they were unconscious.



When she came to, Kintsuno noticed that she was on the ground outside the shop. *What... What just happened?* She looked to her side and saw her sister, Gintsuno, lying spread eagle, unconscious. “G-Gintsuno!” she called, crawling over and shaking her shoulders. “Wake up!”

Suddenly, Ghozal burst from the shop, out for blood. When she saw his face, her memory of the past few minutes came rushing back to her: she had just told Flio’s group to hand over the fan when Ghozal had charged them at full speed, smashing his fists into their faces with enough force not only to knock them unconscious but to send them flying out of the shop. “Th-That man! What kind of human can do *that?!?*” She shook her sister again, but Gintsuno showed no signs of awakening.

Then she noticed that her unconscious sister still had the Scouring Gourd clutched tightly in her hand. *All right...* she thought. *It’s do-or-die.* She took the gourd from Gintsuno’s hand and opened the lid. “Human!” she shouted, “Out of respect for your power, I ask your name!” Uliminas and Flio both burst out laughing.

She can’t be serious, can she? thought Flio. *She’s going to try the same trick again?*

She’s a meowron, thought Uliminas. *We just saw Balirossa get sucked into that thing! Even Ghozal wouldn’t—*

“It’s Ghozal,” said Ghozal.

Flio and Uliminas both came tumbling down the stairs. “D-Don’t!” shouted Flio.

“Mew *blockhead!*” shouted Uliminas.

Ignoring them, Kintsuno held out the Scouring Gourd and grinned fiendishly. “Ghozal!” she cried.

“What?!” Ghozal snapped back.

“Mew *absolute total enormews blockheeeead!*” Uliminas rushed up to Ghozal and wrapped her arms around his leg. “*Mewdiot!* Don’t mew dare die before I can say I love mew! Before I ask you to meowrry me!” *If I can’t stop him from getting sucked in, at least let us be wine together...* She closed her eyes and held on for dear life.

Kintsuno, on the other hand, looked elated as she brandished the gourd. Time passed.

But Ghozal showed no signs of being absorbed.

“Wh-What’s happening here?” Kintsuno yipped, astonished. Uliminas also looked up at Ghozal, confused. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“Hrm,” said Ghozal, as curt as ever. “Beats me.” Uliminas glared at him.

Kintsuno, for her part, gave the gourd a good rubbing and pointed it back at Ghozal.

“Um... Ghozal!” she yipped.

“What.”

“Ghozal?”

“What.”

“Ghozal! Ghozal! Ghozaaaaaal!”

“I already said, *what!*” Ghozal snapped, already angry and now annoyed at the fox demon unaccountably shouting his name. He flew into a rage and launched himself at Kintsuno.

Kintsuno shrieked and yipped, gripping her head in fear.

That seems to have worked, thought Flio as he sighed with relief while watching the scene play out, *some way or another*. He was still lying where he had fallen after tumbling down the stairs, but his arm was stretched out, a magic circle in front of his open hand. He had conjured a small magic circle at the mouth of the gourd, blocking it off completely. Thanks to Flio’s magic, it made no difference whether or not the gourd was open—it was stopped shut.

◇Minutes Later◇

Kintsuno and Gintsuno were lying beaten and ragged on the road, utterly trampled. They had been completely unable to fight back against Ghozal’s overwhelming power. “How... How can a human be this strong...?” muttered Kintsuno, but Ghozal paid her no heed. He took the Scouring Gourd from her hands.

Flio ran up to him. “Could I see that?” he said. “I might be able to —”

“No,” said Ghozal, “I’ve got it.” He fended Flio off and brought the gourd to his mouth. Flio had stopped using his magic to hold the liquid inside, so it all poured into his mouth. He gulped it down.

Kintsuno grinned as she watched. “That’s the solvent inside the gourd! You drank it! Oooh, I can’t wait to watch you melt from the inside!” she barked. Kintsuno was speaking truly. The Scouring Gourd held a solvent so potent that it could even melt down dragon scales, and Ghozal had drunk the whole thing in one swig.

Kintsuno started to dance with joy, sure of Ghozal’s imminent demise, while Flio and Uliminas turned towards him with worry in their eyes. But Ghozal seemed to be working something over in his

mouth. He spat, and Balirossa appeared, collapsing on the ground in front of him.

“Meow?! I-Is your stomach okay?!”

Ghozal turned to answer Uliminas, holding his stomach. He belched loudly. “Yeah,” he said, “I still have about ten percent of my throat and stomach lining, and it’ll take the chest burn two or three days to kill me. No big deal.” He glanced down at the gourd in his hand. “And now that I’m done with this thing,” he said, and then crushed it in his hand. Kintsuno stopped dancing and fell to the ground, her face pale, and whimpered in distress.

Without bothering to spare a glance for the fox, Ghozal belched again, loudly, and rushed to Balirossa. He took her in his arms. “Balirossa, are you hurt? Are you alive?”

Slowly, Balirossa opened her eyes in a meaningless gesture. The acid had already robbed her of her sight. Her face and body were melted off in patches. It was a miserable sight. “S-Sir Ghozal...” she managed. “Please...don’t look at me now...”

“Why not?” said Ghozal. “You don’t look even a bit less beautiful.”

“Don’t be ridiculous... I know I must look terrible, in this state...”

“That doesn’t change a thing about your beauty.” Ghozal held her tight.

“Sir Ghozal...”

“Your heart is beautiful,” said Ghozal, “and that will never change.”



Uliminas sighed deeply as she watched and slumped her shoulders. *There's meowthing my healing spells can do against damage like that...* she thought. *Ghozal's can't do anything either...* But Flio walked up to them and held his hand over Balirossa. A magic circle appeared, and Balirossa's body began to shine brightly.

"Mister Flio..." said Ghozal, "I don't think even you could—" But then he gasped. Balirossa's wounds were closing with unbelievable speed. Her eyes regained their light and the parts of her skin that had melted off were mended before Ghozal's eyes. Before long, her body looked like nothing had happened.

"M-Meow strong can that guy's meowgic possibly be?!" Uliminas was so awed by what she was seeing that her body began shaking.

Balirossa's eyes blinked, her sight suddenly returned. "Wh-What has happened?" Flustered, she began touching her face and body with her hands, checking if she really had been restored. Ghozal hugged her tight. "Sir Ghozal..."

"I meant what I said," said Ghozal. "Even in that state, your noble heart was shining with beauty."

"Th-Thank you..." Balirossa wrapped her arms around Ghozal's shoulders.

"Well," said Flio, who had stepped back a little from Ghozal and Balirossa, "I guess that went all right." He forced a smile. He felt low on magic and was starting to experience a light vertigo.

It would take him three entire minutes to recover.



Kintsuno ran for her life. When she saw the incredible healing spell Flio was casting, she turned into a demon fox, took Kintsuno in her mouth, and ran. Her speed was so great that none of the residents of the city were certain what they had seen. Bitter tears streamed down her muzzle as she streaked off towards the west. *Not only did we not recover the Eastern Wind, but the Scouring Gourd was destroyed... Ohhh, they'll pay. Believe me, I will have my revenge!*

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

That night, with his magic recovered, Flio healed Ghozal's injuries. "The solvent had started to melt your internal organs. That could have been bad." He grimaced.

"Oh? Hrm... I guess I don't know as much as I thought about myself!" he said, laughing.

"No, Sir Ghozal, listen!" Balirossa was frantic. "You must never do something so reckless again!" Most days, Balirossa would speak to

Ghozal from some distance away, but now she was next to him, their bodies almost touching. She placed a hand gently on his knee. Her face was red with embarrassment. “A-And...I, too, will take care. I would hate to cause you worry.”

Uliminas glanced at Balirossa out of the corner of her eye as Balirossa and Uliminas thanked Flio for healing them. They looked like a good pair, bowing and expressing their gratitude. Uliminas was glum. *Well, she thought, I can't really blame them, after what happened...* She sighed and turned away.

“Oh, Uliminas.” Ghozal suddenly called out to her.

“Meow?”

“So, you wanna get married?”

“*Meow!*” Uliminas’s ears and tail stood straight up as her face went red. She started mouthing incoherently. “M-M-M-Mew meowron! What are mew talking about?!”

“Hrm? Didn’t you say that when you were clinging to my leg? That you love me, and that you wanna get married...” He pressed his finger against his chin and strained himself to remember.

Uliminas, meanwhile, was frozen to the spot, the redness in her face now spread to her upper body. *Dammewt, I can't believe I just blurted that meowt...*

“Hrm,” said Ghozal. “How about this: among demons, it’s normal to have as many as three wives. If you’re willing, Uliminas.”

“Excuse me?!” Balirossa stammered. “Sir Ghozal! You can’t possibly be saying—” She cut herself off. She hadn’t meant to react to Ghozal’s words, and her face was now red too. She hung her head.

“Oh! N-Never mind!”



“My lord husband,” said Rys, “what do you think will happen with those three?” She was sitting next to Flio, watching the proceedings with a shocked expression.

Flio smirked. “Who knows. I certainly can’t imagine,” he said. “Well, whatever happens, happens.”

Rys was silent.

“What’s the matter, Rys?”

“My lord husband...” she said slowly, “you are human, yes?”

“Yeah, last time I checked. Why?”

“Um, I... I promise to devote my whole life to you, so...” a desperate gleam was in her eyes as she did her best to appeal to her husband. Flio thought he understood what she was thinking.

“Me too, Rys,” he said. “I’m yours and no one else’s.”

“My lord husband... Thank you so much.” Rys smiled happily in Flio’s arms and closed her eyes. Beside them, Gholl, Balirossa, and Uliminas continued their conversation. It looked like it would be a while before they would come to any kind of conclusion.

◇Stronghold of the Fox Clan◇

Gintsuno the Silver and Kintsuno the Gold were in shock as they took in the state of their stronghold. Gintsuno yipped. “What... What happened?”

The fox clan’s stronghold was built incorporating the natural mountains and caves of the region. Right now, it was in ruins. Even the mountain itself looked like it had been blasted away. It was a truly horrific sight.

“How...” Kintsuno stared in awe, mumbling to herself, her body shaking. Beside her, Gintsuno sank to the ground in shock.

A surviving demon fox approached. “Elder Kintsuno...” they said. “You see, well... While you were visiting the city, we were attacked by a strange monster.”

“A strange monster?”

“Yes. It wore a suit of black armor on its upper body, and it had a golden mohawk. It looked very strange...but even alone it was absurdly strong. By the time we realized it was here, it had already sent the whole mountain flying...”

“I... What?” Kintsuno gulped in shock. “Well, where is this monster now? I assume you captured it?”

“Well,” the demon fox hesitated, “we destroyed its armor, but that thing was fast. It vanished in the blink of an eye.”

“Imbecile!” yipped Kintsuno. “After all your foolishness, you let this thing get away?! Go after it! It cannot be allowed to escape!”

“Yes, but...”

“But what?! Is there some kind of problem?!”

“W-Well, yes... It’s just that most of us are still trapped under the rubble of our stronghold.”

“What?”

“We need to treat the injured first, and then we need to rebuild...”

The fox’s words made Kintsuno clutch her head in seeming agony. “But,” she whined, “we were going to defeat the Dark One Yuigarde...”

“We might not even be the chiefs anymore after this...” whimpered Gintsuno. The two of them stared in shock for a long while before they finally stood up on their unsteady feet and began to help clean up the scattered rubble.

◇In a Forest◇

Hero Gold-Hair sat on the bank of a river, struggling to catch his breath. “Somehow,” he puffed, “we managed to get away...”

“Yeaah...” said Tsuya. “I was reeeally worried for a while there...” Tsuya sat down next to Hero Gold-Hair. Her hair and clothing were a mess, her smile dry.

“But how were you able to get me out of that damned Cambion’s Armor?”

“Oh, yes! You hit the mountain like *boooooom*! And then looots of foxes and humans came out! They broke the armor for you, Hero Gold-Haaair!”

“I see,” said Gold-Hair. “Judging from how much my body hurts, it looks like I took all sorts of attacks. Well, I suppose they *did* break the curse for us. I should be grateful to them.”

“I think so toooo.”

The two sat next to each other by the river for a while, gazing up at the sky. It was starting to get dark, and the first stars of the night were starting to come out. “Tsuya,” said Hero Gold-Hair, “three things.”

“Yees?”

“First. If you learn about an item, make sure you have the details before telling me about it.”

“Okay, Hero Gold-Haaair!”

“Second, when we *find* the item, make sure *before we use it* that it’s actually the same thing.”

“Yes, Hero Gold-Haaair.”

“And last...even if I did get turned into a monster again, that’s no excuse for pulling my hair so hard!” Gold-Hair pointed emphatically at the top of his head, where his famous hair sat.

“Whaaat?! But, your hair was the only place I could grab ooon!”

“I don’t want to hear about it! It’s just something that’s been

bothering me, okay?!”

“Um, buuut—”

“No buts!”

The pair’s banter went on and on beneath the starry sky.

Epilogue

◇Houghtow City◇

Flio and Rys arrived at an empty building near the Merchants' Guild in Houghtow. Flio took out the key the guild had given him, unlocked the door, and stepped inside. Rys followed behind, looking around curiously. "My lord husband, this is where Mister Holdi's old general store was, is it not?"

"Yes, although now it's just an empty shop. This is the place I bought."

"You bought this building?"

"Yeah." Flio smiled happily at his wife. "I thought we might open a shop here."

"A shop?"

"Yeah!" Flio began to walk slowly around the interior. "This place used to be a general store, so there are still shelves attached to the walls—even some display cases were left behind too." He pointed to a corner of the shop where the aforementioned display cases were lined up next to each other. "The counter's untouched, and there's a storeroom in the basement. And behind the shop there's an area for handling wagon traffic. I really think we can use this!"

"I see! It *does* look promising," said Rys, nodding along as Flio took his look around the store. "Then, my lord husband, is this why you've been going to the Merchants' Guild so often lately? To register this place as a store?"

"Exactly. I even made arrangements to do business with the wholesale market at Klyrode Castle Town. Although *that* got us involved in a bit of an incident."

Rys grimaced. "My husband..." she said, puffing out her cheeks as she pressed up against Flio, "if you were doing this you should have *told* me! I would have helped you..."

Flio pet Rys's head and smiled apologetically. "I'm very sorry about that. I had meant to tell you, but things happened a lot faster than I expected. It was ready before I had a chance to even bring it up." He hugged Rys close and gave another look around the store. "I can make equipment," he said. "Hiya and Belano can make magic gems. We can sell Blossom's vegetables, even set up a registration booth for lending out Byleri's horses...and the Silent Listeners can help acquire and sell items all over the land! Or, at least, that was my

idea.”

“Oh! You intend to hire the Silent Listeners?”

“Yeah. They have a background in intelligence, so they might be good at learning about the prices of goods in different markets, and then selling them at a profit.”

“I’m sure Uliminas will be happy... Oh?”

“What is it, Rys?”

“Oh, it’s just...my lord husband, what will *I* be doing?”

“Oh! You, Balirossa, and Uliminas can handle customers!”

Rys grinned. “Leave it to me! I, Rys, shall be a perfect customer-handler!” She folded her arms and gave the shop a once-over. “But first, we should clean the shop and set the display cases back up. Oh, and we should put items on display too! It’s going to be quite a bit of work!” She seemed motivated to do it, if her smile was anything to go by.

Flio faced Rys with a smile of his own. “Yes...and it will be even busier once our children are born.” Rys’s face flushed a deep red. She unconsciously brought her hands up to touch her belly and shyly looked up at her husband.

“That’s quite all right, my love,” she said. “I very much desire to be busy in that manner.” She inclined her head upwards and closed her eyes. Flio leaned down to touch his lips to hers. For a while, they just kissed in the middle of the empty general store.

Later, a brand new sign went up next to the shop’s entrance. It appeared to have been handmade by Flio, with the words “Fli-o’-Rys General Store” carved on its surface.

Flio and Rys of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store: one, a human from another world; the other, a demon who chose to live among humanity. This would be the start of a great new chapter in their lives.

Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 2

◇Deep in a Forest◇

Hero Gold-Hair looked at the shovel in his right hand, his eyes large with awe. "This Drilldozer Shovel is something else!" he said. In front of him was a great hole, hot water gushing out with surprising force.

"I thought we were digging a well for drinking waaater..."

"Yeah, me too. I didn't expect something like this to come out."

The two exchanged a glance as the hot water continued to issue forth.

It took half a day for the water to reach equilibrium. It had settled into something you might call a small pond with the hole Gold-Hair dug at its epicenter. Tsuya timidly stuck her hand in the water. "Hero Gold-Haaair," she said, "this feels pretty good!"

"Yeah? Let me try!" Following her example, Hero Gold-Hair stuck his own hand in the hot water. "You're right! It turned out quite nicely. Shall we take a bath?"

"Yeees!" Tsuya cheered. "Hooray!" Her clothes were already halfway off. She cast off her cloak and tossed her rather provocative undergarments aside until she stood entirely naked. She skittered off towards the pond.

"Y-You fool!" Hero Gold-Hair shouted, flustered. He picked up her abandoned clothes to shake off the mud and folded them neatly. "Who just gets naked with no hesitation like that?! It's shameful!"

Gold-Hair's words seemed to snap Tsuya back to reality. "O-Oh nooooo?!" she cried. She blushed and began doing her best to cover her breasts and body with her hands as she got in the water.

Hero Gold-Hair sighed and walked behind a tree to take off his own clothing, which he folded and laid on a nearby boulder. "That woman... Should I just avert my eyes from her entirely?" He wrapped a towel around his waist and stepped out from behind the tree. "Well, it is what it is," he said. He lowered himself into the water.

"Oh!" said Gold-Hair. "This is a good temperature."

"Isn't iiit?" Tsuya smoothly moved through the water, coming up close to him. While Hero Gold-Hair had been busy with his clothes, Tsuya had wrapped a towel around herself as well. However, a single towel was plainly too small to fit around her voluptuous chest. It was plain to see that the cloth was digging into her breasts, binding them tight.

Gold-Hair caught himself staring. *I still can't believe that chest of hers...* he thought.

Suddenly, the towel, pulled taut around Tsuya's breasts, launched off of her like a sling. "O-Oh? Oh, noooo!" Tsuya tried frantically to hide her chest with her arms.

Gold-Hair was overtaken by a sudden coughing fit. Given where he had been looking, he had just caught an entire eyeful of Tsuya's naked chest. His cheeks red, he stared determinedly up at the sky.

"W-Well!" he declared. "It seems one towel won't cut it. Here. Use mine." Still staring up at the sky, he procured one of his own towels and held it out to her.

"Reaaally? Maaay I?"

"Of course, just put it on quickly! I want to have a calm, relaxing bath, and I can't do it if you're traipsing around like *that!*"

"O-Okaaay!" she said, and then she noticed something. "Oh?" There was something stiff and erect under the towel Hero Gold-Hair still had wrapped around his waist. The sight of Gold-Hair's too-natural reaction to seeing her naked breasts made her freeze up for a second.

"Eeeek!" Tsuya shrieked, splashing water on his face. "H-Hero Gold-Haaair! Don't be a peeervert!"

"Wait! Tsuya! You've got it wrong! Or...maybe not entirely, but—"

"Get away from me, you peeerv!"

"Imbecile!" Gold-Hair shouted back. "Who are *you* calling a pervert?! First of all, it's all because of *your* ridiculous—"

As the evening sun shone from the crest of the mountains, Gold-Hair and Tsuya continued to shout at each other. Truly, Hero Gold-Hair was in some hot water.

◇Dark Citadel, Throne Room◇

The Dark One Yuigarde sat upon his throne, his feet twitching irritably. His expression looked like he had just swallowed a bug. "Hey Phufun."

"What is it you wish, my master?" Phufun, who had been waiting to the side of his throne, pushed her fake glasses up the ridge of her nose and maneuvered around to the front of the Dark One.

"Are we still waiting on a response from those western foxes? Well?!" he spat.

"W-We've sent three different emissaries to inquire about them, but we still don't..."

Yuigarde clicked his tongue and shifted in his seat. "Hmph. Driven out of the hot springs, officers not talking, listening to every damned complaint any demon has..." Yuigarde sprung to his feet, suddenly shouting with a loud voice. "Am I not the Dark One?! The greatest of

all demonkind?! How did things turn out so wrong?!" Spent, he slumped back into his throne and started tapping his foot on the floor in irritation.

He looked to his side, where the Infernals were meant to be waiting. There was no one. "And what are the Infernal Three doing?! Why aren't they here?! Huh?!"

"Ahh... Those three said they were going to observe their assigned regions..."

"Idiot!" Yuigarde bellowed. He threw the crown on his head at Phufun, scoring a hit directly to her forehead. Trickle of fresh blood ran down her face. "'Observe'?! They had *underlings* to do that when Ghozal was in charge! They just don't want to talk to me!"

Yuigarde kept rambling as he sank into his seat. Time and time again he kept adjusting his position. It looked like he was rather uncomfortable sitting on his throne.

◇Klyrode Castle—Maiden Queen's Chambers◇

The Maiden Queen lay on her bed resting on her stomach, moaning, her face red. A smaller girl was on top of her.

"Is that good, my sister the Queen?" the smaller girl asked.

"Ohhh, yes... There... Right there, Princess... Harder..."

"Here? Very well then."

"Aaah, yes! Oh, I can feel it..."

The Maiden Queen's teenage sister was perched on top of her, working her thumb and the ridge of her hand into the tense spots of her sister's back as the Queen cried out in relief.

"My sister the Queen, your muscles are terribly stiff... I would not think you to be only thirty years of age."

The Queen winced. "My sister the Third Princess... I am only twenty-nine years old."

"I do not believe one year more or less should make much difference."

"No, my sister the Third Princess, that one year is a woman's pride."

"That isn't very persuasive, not with your back so tight and bunched up like an old woman's."

"Ohhh!" the Queen cried as her sister pushed on a pressure point. "Yes! Right there! It feels so good..."

The Third Princess sighed. "My sister the Queen, I'm afraid you have been working too hard. From dawn to midnight you're in meetings, conducting interviews, or handling paperwork... You scarcely give yourself time to breathe!"

"It's unavoidable, I'm afraid, my sister the Third Princess. We had to banish everyone the old King so much as breathed on, and now we

simply don't have enough people to govern the kingdom. Until we can find new people to fill out their ranks, I *have* to do this. I am the one who deemed it necessary to drive them out, after all."

"I understand," said the Third Princess, pushing harder on the pressure point in the middle of her sister's back, "but even so, there's no reason to push your body to such a— Huh?" Suddenly, she tilted her head, realizing something was wrong. Her sister had been so *responsive* to her touch until now, but this time she gave no response at all.

Frantic, the Princess took a look at the Queen's face. She had fallen asleep, and was now snoring peacefully before her eyes. Her hair was ragged, her body was in shambles, and she had dark bags under her eyes. In order to cut costs, she had eliminated any budget for her own personal cosmetics or wardrobe, dedicating everything to hiring new staff from the castle town, putting her appearance a distant second to her duties. She had likewise eliminated any budget for massage therapy, which was why, when her body built up too much fatigue to function, it fell to her younger sister to massage her back.

"My sister's so worn out...and it's all because of that wicked old man..." the Princess wiped a tear from her eye. She had gotten so emotional that she couldn't hold herself back from crying. "My wonderful, wonderful sister... At the very least, I can get rid of *all* your fatigue while you sleep!" She seized her sister's leg and wrenched it, twisting it upwards as hard as she could. It bent back unnaturally.

There was a sickening crunch, and the Maiden Queen's screams filled the chamber.

For the next few days, the Maiden Queen performed her official functions sitting in a wheelchair. And the one pushing the chair, with a very apologetic expression, was none other than the Third Princess.

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Flio's house stood outside the walls of Houghtow City. In front of it was a large sprawling garden and pasture. Recently, a small cabin had been set up to the side of the garden.

Two goblins stepped out, both stretching their arms wide as they began a set of physical exercises.

"Hmm... Good weather again," said the larger goblin, Maunty.

"Indeed!" replied the smaller goblin, Hokh'hokton. The two continued their exercises, watching as the morning sun rose above the horizon.

"It's another busy day, Hokh'hokton!"

"Yes! We must be of use to the noble Lady Blossom, to pay her back for this house." As the two stretched, they could hear the clattering noise of a cart's wheels. "Oh, is she already awake? How

splendid!”

Now they could see Blossom coming from the direction of Flio’s house. Behind her, Sybe in psychobear form came pulling the cart. The two goblins stood at attention.

“Good morning, Lady Blossom, Esteemed Sybe!” said Maunty.

“It is, as always, an honor to serve you,” said Hokh’hokton.

“Nah, I told you guys, you’re the ones helping *me* out here! I should be thanking you, if anything.” Blossom grinned cheerfully and clapped both goblins on the shoulders. “Thanks to you, we’re breezing through the weeding, we’ve made the garden bigger, and we’re doin’ harvests *way* faster. It’s all good, as far as I’m concerned!” Blossom reached into her bag and took out two wrapped parcels. “Here, I brought you breakfast. Lady Rys wrapped it up for you.”

“Oh! How joyous!” cheered Maunty.

“Lady Rys’s cooking is all we need to work hard every day!” added Hokh’hokton.

The two goblins quickly unwrapped their parcels, and started to eat. “Are y’all really okay with this shack?” asked Blossom. “I’ve told you before, you’re allowed to come live inside Lord Flio’s house.”

“What are you saying, Lady Blossom?” said Maunty. “We are nothing but your humble servants!”

“Indeed!” said Hokh’hokton. “It is important for a servant to live like a servant— Sir Maunty! Those egg rolls are mine!”

“I’m only taking a *little*...and besides, you ate one too many rice balls!”

Blossom’s smile looked strained. She and Flio had both tried to persuade them otherwise, but the two goblins had *insisted* on their standing as servants and fervently rejected the offer to live together. In the end, Flio had built a small cabin off to the side of the garden for them to live in. It looked cramped from the outside, but it was actually a very comfortable little house, with private rooms for the two of them, a kitchen, and a bath.

“Oh, Lady Blossom,” said Maunty, “we’ve been expanding the garden quite a bit, haven’t we?”

Blossom grinned. “That’s right!” she said. “After all, from here on out, we’re gonna be growing and selling ’em like crazy!”

“Selling? Goodness!” exclaimed Hokh’hokton. “I know you have at times sold your vegetables to the wholesaler in the city. Do you intend to increase that number?”

“No, not quite!” said Blossom. “Lord Flio’s gonna be opening a shop! He said he’d be happy to sell the vegetables we grow.”

“Well, this is a surprise! Direct to market!”

“I guess we gotta put our backs into it!” The two goblins stood up sharply.

Blossom clenched her fist in determination. "Yeah," she said. "From now on, customers will see and buy our vegetables directly from us. So let's grow a harvest that won't put our store to shame! Let's make the Fli-o'-Rys General Store number one in Houghtow!"

"Yeah!" both cried at once.

After the two finished eating, they made haste for the garden. "Those two really are good workers," muttered Blossom, looking back over her shoulder at the psychobear she had brought with her. "Sybe, we better not fall behind!"

"Gwor!" Sybe did a strongman pose with both arms.

Blossom grinned. "All right! You ready?"

"Gwowor!"

Blossom hefted her dragonscale hoe and headed off to the fields with Sybe following behind and pulling the wagon.





“Wow, Blossom’s, like, really raring to go, huh?” Byleri smiled as she watched Blossom and Sybe psyche themselves up from her pasture. She was here bringing breakfast to the horse-type magic beasts Flio had bound with the spell Subjugation and entrusted to her to raise. As she stepped inside the stables, a chorus of happy whinnies greeted her.

“Good morning! I brought you breakfast!” Byleri smiled as she took a large quantity of hay in her arms and went to fill the feed boxes in front of the fence.

The magic beasts stuck their heads out and began to eat greedily. “I, like, brought plenty for everyone! Eat your fill, okay?” said Byleri, cheerfully handing out more and more hay. “Like, we’re gonna have people signing up to borrow you at Lord Flio’s shop, right? Up until now it’s just been word of mouth, y’know? There’s probably gonna be waaay more people... Like, I’m counting on you, okay?” The horses neighed loudly. Byleri smiled, gladdened by their response.

Before long, all the hay had been transferred from the cart to the feed boxes. “Phew!” Byleri sighed. “Like, finally!” She washed her arms at a nearby bucket of water and made sure to wring every bit of moisture out of the towel when she had finished. “Hee hee hee... And that means it’s time for the thing I’ve been, like, looking forward to!”

Giggling through tightly shut lips, Byleri went into a small room at the end of the stable. This room had originally been meant to be used as storage for Byleri’s tools. Byleri sat down on a chair in the middle of the room, and pulled up one of the floorboards.

“Hee hee hee... Hiya, like, found my secret book under the bed, right? But there’s *no* way they’ll *ever* think to look *here*, y’know?”

Inside the space underneath the floorboard was absolutely nothing.

“Huh?” Her eyes blinked open. But no matter how hard she looked, there really was nothing. “N-No way! Like, it was here! This is where I hid the book I bought the other day: *The Splendid Art of Lovemaking: A Collection of True Stories*. It had pictures, and it was so, like, detailed...”

Byleri stuck her face up into the space under the floorboards and opened the drawers, searching everywhere for the book, but it was nowhere to be found.



While Byleri was frantically searching the stable for her book,

Hiya was inside their own mindscape. With them was the Grand Magus of Midnight, Damalynas, whose soul Hiya had bound to this world. Hiya was sitting on their knees in the middle of the pure white expanse, a book open on their lap. Damalynas was reading over their shoulder. Both seemed deeply absorbed in the material.

“Your Divinity... This book, *The Splendid Art of Lovemaking: A Collection of True Stories*... It’s quite detailed, isn’t it?” Damalynas’s cheeks were red as she stared at an illustration of a man and woman engaged in sexual intercourse. It was evidently drawn with painstaking care. Something about it made Damalynas swallow nervously.

Beside her, Hiya wore an awed expression. “Well, well...Ser Byleri has a real eye for quality. I have yet to be disappointed by one of her books. This is stimulating my intellectual curiosity to no end!” Hiya had been watching using their surveillance magic as Byleri hid her latest purchase. It was a simple matter to sneak in when Byleri was away and take her book for their own purposes.



As they read, Damalynas started to squirm.

“Y-Your Divinity...?”

“Yes, Damalynas, what is it?”

Damalynas leaned up against Hiya. “Um...I don’t know how much longer I can bear just looking...”

Hiya’s lips curled up in a smile. “I *see*,” they said. “Then you wish to resume our...*training*.” They took Damalynas gently in their arms and leaned in for a kiss.

Damalynas softly closed her eyes, when...

“Mx. Hiya?” A woman’s voice echoed throughout Hiya’s mindscape. “...Mx. Hiya?”

Damalynas’s eyes shot open. “Who dares?!” she spat, furious. “Who *dares* to interrupt my training with my god?!”

“Hmm...” Hiya tilted their head and stood up. “Well, it seems to be Ser Belano. I wonder what she wants.”

Damalynas looked up at Hiya with a thoroughly pitiable expression, blinking dejectedly. “But, Your Divinity, if we stop here, I’ll...”

Hiya smiled down at her. “Don’t worry. I will return as soon as this matter is dealt with. Be a good girl and wait for me.” They leaned down to kiss Damalynas on the lips, their tongue wrapping around hers. Damalynas’s eyes glazed over, intoxicated with the sensation. “I will see you later.”

“Y-Yes, Your Divinity,” Damalynas squeaked out. “I’ll be a good girl and wait for you...”

Hiya favored her with another smile and vanished.

◇Flio’s House—Living Room◇

Hiya opened their eyes to see Belano in front of them. “Oh, good...” she said, sighing with relief. “You weren’t moving. I was worried...”

Hiya smiled. “I was simply deep in thought. Did you wish something of me, Ser Belano?”

Belano nodded her head and took a number of magic gems out of her bag. She lined them up on the table. “I tried enchanting some magic gems, but I don’t think I did it right...”

“I see. Let me take a look.” Hiya held out their hand above the magic gems on the table. Their expression went dark. “Ser Belano, this won’t do at all. There is hardly any magic power in these gems.”

“So I *did* mess up...”

“You did.” Hiya took one of the gems and placed it on the palm of their hand. They performed a short incantation, and a magic circle appeared, slowly enveloping the gem. “Hm... I believe your error was

in trying to enchant too many magic gems at once.” Belano pursed up her lips, frustrated. Hiya sighed when they noticed her expression.

“I suppose you are eager to enchant gems for sale, as was asked of you by the Exalted One,” they continued, “but your magic power still needs training, Ser Belano. Start enchanting gems one at a time, making certain to properly infuse them with magic. Then move on to creating many at a time once you have mastered *that*. I am certain that the Exalted One, too, wishes for you to take your development one step at a time.”

Belano nodded, her expression downcast. Hiya placed a hand on her shoulder and gave her a practiced smile. “Ser Belano, there is no need to be in such a hurry. Though I am hardly worthy, I have been tasked with your instruction, as well as to create magic gems myself. We will both give this our best effort, will we not?” Hiya pressed down lightly on Belano’s shoulder and began to move towards the stairs to the second floor. “Now, let us see you try again to enchant a magic gem. This time, I will assist you.”

“Okay...” Belano nodded and followed Hiya to her room, where she usually did her work. She clutched her failed magic gems tightly in her hand. *Lord Flio*, she thought. *I’ll do my best.*



Rys was on her way to the kitchen when she saw Hiya and Belano go up the stairs. She smiled. “Well, it seems like things are going well with those two,” she said as she stepped up to the counter where a pile of freshly packed lunches was waiting. “Blossom, Sybe, and Byleri are hard at work too. But I’m not going to let them show me up!”

Rys pumped her fists in front of her, working up her fighting spirit, and began to put the lunches into her bag. Since it was of the Bottomless variety, the inside of the bag was dozens of times more spacious than it looked. The pile of lunches fit inside easily. They were gone in a flash.

“Now I must take these to my lord husband.” Rys took the Bottomless Bag by her teeth and began to transform into a great wolf. The white dress she was wearing shone with light, and vanished. Now naked, beautiful silver fur appeared all over her body as she finished changing her shape.

Rys left through the front door, which she opened using magic, and darted outside. Without missing a beat, she bolted off somewhere at full speed, too fast for the human eye to follow.



“All right, mew lot, let’s keep it up!”

The intelligence specialists—formerly known as the Silent Listeners—cheered in response to Uliminas’s words. All thirty of them were milling about in the wagon staging area behind a shop. Out front, there was a brand new sign indicating the building’s name: *Flio’s-Rys General Store*.

“Greanyl, meow are things purroceeding?”

“Oh! Excuse me, just a moment...” the shadow demon said. She looked through her papers three more times just to be sure of giving an accurate answer, tracing the words with her finger. “Yes, I’ve finished organizing wagon teams bound for Klyrode Castle and the cities Sojieya and Kralsiki. We are prepared to set out at any time.”

“Mew got enough wagons?” asked Uliminas.

“Yes, the ones we availed ourselves to when we left the Dark Citadel should be enough for now.”

Uliminas leaned in close to whisper in Greanyl’s ear. “And don’t furrget,” she said, “your meowrdrs are to get whatever information mew can from our suppliers, no matter how trivial it sounds. What stuff’s been selling out, any rumeowrs about market trends, or what the humans or the Dark Army are up to... I want *every* detail!”

“Yes, ma’am! And then I’ll double-check whether I should share the information.”

Uliminas nodded. “Failure *is not* purrmitted. Flio hired us when nobody else in the human world would give us the time of day! It would shame the Silent Listeners if we can’t pay him back for taking us meown!”

Greanyl nodded once, emphatically.

“Oh, Uliminas! I didn’t realize you were here.” Flio stepped out to the staging area, Rys following along behind him.

“Flio! Speak of the devil,” said Uliminas. No sooner had the name left her lips than Silent Listeners stopped their work and hurried behind Uliminas, lining up in rows.

“Sorry to get in the way of your work,” said Flio, a contrite smile on his face. “Rys made lunch for everyone, so I thought I’d come see if you’d like to take a break.” The words seemed to cause a bit of commotion among the ranks of the Listeners.

“Wait. L-Lady Rys is Lady Fenrys, isn’t she?” one called out.

“This is *the* Lady Fenrys, the Infernal Fengaryl’s number two, and she’s making lunch? For *us*?” said another.

“No way. I simply refuse to believe it,” said a third.

Demon society was strictly hierarchical, even down to what tasks a demon would perform. Food preparation was accordingly considered menial work suitable for an underling. Never in a million years would a high-ranking demon prepare food for those beneath her.

Rys stepped out in front of the noisy crowd, smiling cheerily.

“There’s no need to pay that sort of thing any mind,” she said. “I am helping you, who are all helping my lord husband. Therefore, preparing food for you is very appropriate work for a wife.” Without further ado, she began to take the lunches out from her Bottomless Bag.

Lupine demons like Rys had a strong sense of pack loyalty. Instinctively, she regarded not only her husband Flio but everyone who worked with him as fellow pack-mates. The Silent Listeners, however, remembered Rys from her days in the Dark Army, drunk on her own power and contemptuous towards those she regarded as beneath her—which was more or less everyone. To them, this development seemed like the height of absurdity.

“Lady Rys!” Balirossa rushed onto the scene, running up to Rys, who was getting ready to try to hand her lunches to the Silent Listeners, who were now actively shrinking away. “Please, leave this task to me!”

Rys turned her smiling face towards Balirossa. “Balirossa, aren’t you busy preparing the store for customers? Please, let me handle this.”

“But!”

“It’s all right! I’ll come help you once I’ve handed out all these lunches.” She handed one of her lunches to Balirossa.

“You shall? Very well. I will take you at your word and return to my tasks.”

“Thank you,” said Rys. “I hesitate to imagine what we’d find if we left Ghozal to set up the shop on his own.”

“That’s quite the thing to say behind someone’s back!” Ghozal, who had come out of the shop at some point, laughed heartily as he walked up to Rys and Balirossa. Even Rys smiled at his attitude.

“And *you’re* going to be a porter and guard at my lord husband’s shop, so that makes you part of this. I expect good work from you!”

“Hrm,” said Ghozal, “I’ve never done such lowly work before. It seems fun! I’m excited to get started.” Rys chuckled and Ghozal joined in with a mighty, “Ha ha ha!”

Greanyl and the rest of the Silent Listeners’ eyes were wide. They couldn’t believe what they were seeing. Ghozal was once the Dark One, and he was *still* a member of the demon royal family. And here he was, laughing, enthusiastic to work as a porter and guard.

“The Dark One...is going to carry luggage?” Greanyl spoke as though the words were being wrung out of her.

“This general store is shaping up to be quite a peculiar operation,” mused Balirossa. “Is it not, Lord Flio?”

“Hm? How so?” Flio looked genuinely perplexed.

“Well, to begin with, you have the former Dark One as well as his

former soldiers in the Dark Army working like commoners.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s anything to worry about.”

“What?” Balirossa was shocked.

But Flio just smiled and continued. “It’ll be all right as long as we keep doing honest work, I think. As long as we do, I don’t expect anyone to particularly care about our backgrounds. The more good merchants, the better it is for everyone.” He paused. “You know, in the world I came from, demihumans faced terrible persecution, but I knew a kijin named Kuro who did good, honest work for years—maybe decades. It was slow, but eventually some humans started treating him like they would anyone else.”

Balirossa had listened to Flio’s story with great interest. “I see. I had no idea... But Lord Flio, we are sure to have rivals, are we not? If even one of them were to look into Sir Ghozal and the others and discover who they are...”

Flio took in a sharp breath before adopting his practiced calm smile. “If that happens, well...I’ll take care of it, one way or another. If Rys and I can accept each other for what we are, and if you and Ghozal can be as close as you’ve gotten, I’m sure the rest will come around eventually.”

“Wha—?! Lord Flio, excuse me for a moment! I-I...” she sputtered. “Yes, Ghozal and I both reside at your estate, and now we are both workers for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, but I wouldn’t say we are especially close, not on a personal level...”

“Really? Didn’t you go out together the other day?” Flio tilted his head, studying Balirossa curiously as the knight tried to cover up her reddening face with her hands.

“N-No! That was— I mean, it wasn’t...”

As Balirossa was stammering out her response, Uliminas ran up to them, death in her eyes. “Balirossa! Mew expect me to purrtend I didn’t hear what Flio said just meow?! We purromised not to go behind each other’s backs!”

“Ah! Ser Uliminas, you misunderstand!”

“What’s wrong, Balirossa?” Ghozal interjected. “Is there something wrong with us going out to eat together?”

“See?!” mewled Uliminas. “Mew *have* been going behind my back!”

“Sir Ghozal! I-I asked you to keep that a secret!”

Suddenly, Flio found himself surrounded by Gholl, Balirossa, and Uliminas, all clamoring to be heard over each other. Uliminas subjected them to an incredible tirade while Balirossa stammered out excuses and Ghozal just kept laughing in that loud voice of his.

Flio’s smile was strained when Rys walked up to him. She had just

finished handing out her homemade lunches. “What do you think you’re doing in front of my lord husband?” she chided them, her arms both transforming into lupine form, complete with deadly claws. “Would you kindly settle down?”

Flio rushed to stop her. “There’s no need for that,” he said. “I’m sure everyone will calm down in a minute.”

“You are? Well, if my husband says so...” Rys looked strangely reluctant to turn her arms back into a human’s, but Flio breathed a sigh of relief when she finally did. “Forgive my impertinence,” Rys said, turning to face her husband, “but in times such as this, is it not important to assert your dominance, my lord husband?”

“Well, maybe...” Flio lowered his head apologetically. This didn’t seem at all to satisfy Rys.

“Honestly, you really are too gentle...”

“I’ll take care to reign that in,” Flio said. “From now on, I’m going to be responsible for a shop, after all.”

“Do you promise?”

“Yes, I promise.” Flio nodded, once again wearing his calm smile. Rys drew close to him and wrapped her arms around one of his.

“Um... That all aside,” she said, suddenly shy. She fidgeted with her hands as her eyes studied the pavement. “I have a favor to ask, if I may...”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Well...I was wondering if we might stock up on...l-lembons.”

“Huh?” The light seemed to go out of Flio’s eyes. He slumped over dramatically. “Rys,” he said, “don’t we already have thirty crates full of lembons?”

“My lord husband, a lupine demon’s pregnancy is very short. Once it happens, it won’t be but a month until I give birth...”

“Th-Then you shouldn’t need to stock up so much, should you?”

“On the contrary!” Rys launched into a lecture, gesticulating with both hands. “What if I end up pregnant again shortly after our first child? And what if I keep getting pregnant, again and again and again?! I want to take every precaution now, so that when it happens, there is no need to panic...” Flio was helpless in the face of Rys’s verbal onslaught.

“So, my lord husband,” Rys continued, wrapping her arms around Flio’s torso and pressing her reddened cheek against his chest, “make sure you take care of me properly... We wouldn’t want the lembons to go to waste, after all...”

Flio held Rys tight, a wry smile on his face. *Gods help me*, he thought, *I’m going to end up buying more lembons, aren’t I...?* They stayed like that for a while, locked in a tender embrace.

They all stayed at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store until late that day, chattering merrily as they worked.

Afterword

I would like to express my gratitude to you for reading this book. It's thanks to all my readers that I was able to bring you the second volume of *Level 2 Cheat*. I owe this to the support of countless people like you, between everyone who purchased the first volume and everyone who gave me words of encouragement every day as I wrote the web novel. I am truly grateful.

This version has started to diverge from how it was in the web novel, but in both versions you can enjoy the daily life of Flio and his ridiculous friends.

I believe you may have already noticed, but there were several settings in the story to which I have something of an emotional attachment. The obvious one this time was the hot springs. It's been a long time since I had the pleasure of going to the springs myself. I am very much looking forward to taking a trip when I have some free time.

In the web novel, Flio's first enterprise was the Ugo General Store, but in the light novel he's starting with Fli-o'-Rys. I wonder what will happen with that shop, and what will become of Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya on their disastrous journey. I suppose we'll find out in the third volume. I hope you will join me.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Katagiri-sama for the excellent illustrations, and everyone at Overlap for handling the publishing side of things. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Miya Kinojo, April 2017



Chillin' in Another World
with **W 2**
SUPER CHEAT POWERS 2

Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri



“Haaah...”

“I get why mew’d
go head over heels
for her...”

“Babies...
Babies...”



Bonus Short Stories

A Girl's Best Friend?

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Two things stood out in Flio's living room. The first was the large table with an impressive number of chairs lined along either side, around which the household took their meals. The other was Sybe's hutch. Although Sybe spent most of its time transformed into a unicorn rabbit thanks to a little spellcraft of Flio's, it was first and foremost a psychobear. Flio had built the hutch to be comfortable for Sybe in either of its forms and—accordingly—very large.

Sybe was currently in the hutch in its psychobear form, fast asleep and completely exposed. It was lying on its back, and on its belly was a girl—Blossom. She was naked except for her undergarments, lying facedown on top of Sybe's fluffy belly and sleeping soundly.

It was before daybreak, and outside it was still dark. It was even darker inside the house, but Blossom's eyes shot open. She sat up and yawned.

"Another morning..." she mumbled, climbing down from Sybe's belly. Blossom was large for a girl, but Sybe was almost twice her size. On top of the psychobear, she looked almost petite.

"Sybe's belly sure is nice and fluffy, though," she said as her feet reached the floor. "It makes for a comfortable mattress! I was sleeping like the dead." She reached down to grab her discarded clothing from off the floor. She had been overheating last night on account of the giant warm-blooded psychobear she had been spending the night on top of, and had pulled off her clothing in her sleep.

As Blossom dressed herself, Sybe roused from its slumber and sluggishly sat up. "Morning, Sybe!" she said. "Time to get up and get farming!"

"Gwor..." Sybe mumbled sleepily. Then it stretched with a louder (but still very tired), "Gwooor!"

Blossom smiled at Sybe's antics. "Aha ha, you awake there, Sybe? We got lots to do today." Blossom jabbed Sybe's belly with her fist.

She had actually struck him with a fair amount of power, but Sybe didn't even react. As fluffy as its belly may have seemed, a human simply could not punch hard enough to hurt a psychobear. Sybe flailed its legs and arms feebly as Blossom's affectionate fists sunk into

its fluff.



Blossom walked down the road that led away from the house past Byleri's ranch towards the fields. When she was a young girl growing up in a rural farmhouse, Blossom's parents had been sure to teach her everything they knew about farming. Even now, farming was her specialty, so much so that she had, without really intending to, turned the tiny garden that had once adjoined the house into a sprawling farm. She would then deliver everything she grew to the kitchen of Flio's house. It was safe to say that most of the food on their plates on any given day came from Blossom's farm.

"Okay!" Blossom said, taking the hoe she had been carrying slung over her shoulder in her hands. "Let's get to work!"

She made her way into the fields, Sybe following behind. It was in its unicorn rabbit form again, walking skillfully on its two hind legs and pulling out weeds with both forepaws. It would sandwich a weed between the pads of its paws and jump, yanking it out in one go. It was very used to this work and before long had accumulated a pile of weeds about as large as its own body.

The pair stopped. They could see something through the foliage of the forest. *Several* somethings. They were vampire wolves: a pack of three, all ravenously famished. They were staring at them, looking very much like they were considering sating their hunger with Blossom and Sybe.

Sybe walked to the road on two legs as it carried its mound of weeds. It put the weeds down by the shoulder of the road, clapped its paws to shake off the bits of leaf, and turned to head back to the fields. It was like one of the wolves had shouted, "*Now!*" The instant Sybe's back was turned, they tore out of the forest and descended upon the unicorn rabbit.

Vampire wolves are beasts that use their sharp teeth to drain the blood of their prey. Once their prey has been immobilized from blood loss, the wolves devour their flesh at their leisure. However, the horn of a unicorn rabbit was also very sharp. If a vampire wolf were to attack a unicorn rabbit head-on, it very well might not return unscathed. But right now it was three against one. Even if Sybe were to turn around in time to gouge one of them, the other two would descend on it and rip it apart. Or so the wolves believed.

One wolf came from directly behind. Another came from the right, and the third, the left. Mustering their last reserves of strength, the starving wolves charged in, eager to sink their fangs into Sybe. *Thud!* Just as they came within striking distance of the rabbit, the three wolves crashed into something solid. It was then that they noticed the

invisible barrier between them and their dinner. They were at the boundary of the magical barrier Flio had set up to protect his household.

The three wolves lay where they had fallen after their collision with the barrier, utterly confused by what had happened. Then, a large shadow fell over them. Slowly, they raised their heads. Before them was Sybe, fully transformed into its psychobear form. Still sensing hostility from the vampire wolves, Sybe now stood looming menacingly over the would-be hunters.

Even if it was on the other side of the barrier, the vampire wolves could only cower before the enormous figure, drooping their tails and shaking with terror. They had attacked thinking that their prey was a unicorn rabbit. If that had known they faced a psychobear—a beast against whom they stood no chance at all of victory—they would have never dared to try.

Sybe looked down at the three and began to approach, swinging its arms with big swipes. It lowered its head as it grew closer and started to sniff. The wolves' instincts told them that they were about to be eaten. They would have run for the hills, but between their extreme hunger and mortal fear, they couldn't move a muscle.

Sybe pulled its head back and turned away from the wolves, walking back in the direction of the farm. It returned before long, but this time it had brought Blossom.

"Well, if you insist, Sybe, I suppose we'll see what we can do," said Blossom. Together, she and Sybe headed off into the forest.



Not long after, the wolves were greedily devouring the mushrooms Blossom had roasted.

Blossom grinned. "Seems y'all like the shadishrooms," she said. She skewered another freshly harvested shadishroom on the end of a stick and stuck it in the simple stove she had made by piling up rocks in a dome.

Shadishrooms were an edible mushroom that grew abundantly in the mountains. Because of their tendency to grow very high up on trees, they were considered hard to find, but they were prized as a meaty and nutritious fungus, edible by herbivores and carnivores alike. Blossom knew the places where shadishrooms grew by heart, and since she rode on Sybe's shoulders, she was able to collect a great number of them to give to the vampire wolves.

When they had eaten their fill, the wolves bowed by lowering their heads a number of times, then returned to the forest.

"Come back anytime you feel hungry, y'hear?" said Blossom, waving them goodbye as Sybe waved energetically beside her with

both arms. “Next time we’ll get Lady Rys to cook you up some proper meat!”

“I remember having to steel myself up to face those things back when I was a knight,” she mused after they were out of sight. “Feels weird not being scared of ’em at all. It’s thanks to you, Sybe.” She playfully jabbed the psychobear in its side with her elbow. Sybe made a happy noise and rubbed its cheek against hers.

“Aha ha, all right, all right!” she said. “We’re going to be late, but let’s wrap things up here and head back to the house. It’s almost time for breakfast.” Sybe made another happy noise, turned back into a unicorn rabbit, and headed once again back to the fields.



“Oh? Y’all wouldn’t happen to be the same ones from yesterday, would you?”

The next day when Blossom and Sybe made their usual trip to the farm, they found the vampire wolves from before waiting for them. At their feet, a great number of magical beasts lay dead. “You hunted these for us?” asked Blossom. “That’s what this is?” In response, the wolves drew back from their kills and sat down.

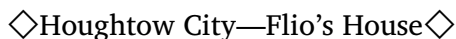
“Hey, there’s no need for anything like that!” she said. “Oh, I know! Why don’t we all eat together?” It looked like the wolves understood her words. At the very least, they began happily wagging their tails.

“You’re gettin’ meat first thing in the morning, Sybe!” Blossom turned to her companion. “You happy?”

Sybe gave a cheerfully affirmative “Gwor!”

Ever since that day, the vampire wolves would come and visit now and again. They would bring meat, and Blossom would cook it up for all of them to share. It seemed that Blossom and Sybe had made three new friends.

Flio, the Grand Magus of Midnight



Past the entryway to Flio’s house was a hallway leading off to the left. Following the hallway all the way would take you to the living room, but to its right was a flight of stairs leading to the second floor where everyone’s bedrooms were located.

At present, Flio and Rys had just returned from the city. “Hey! We’re home!” called Flio.

“We’ve returned!” added Rys.

Two figures appeared from the living room at the end of the hallway: Hiya, and with them, Damalynas. “Your return gladdens me, O Exalted One, mistress,” said Hiya, bowing deeply.

“Welcome home, both of you,” said Damalynas, bowing alongside Hiya.

Flio faced them with his practiced calm smile. “It’s my pleasure to be—wait, hold on. Hiya, isn’t it about time you retired the ‘Exalted One’ thing? It’s just a little too over the top. It puts me on edge.” He grimaced.

The corners of Hiya’s mouth turned up in a smile. “I’m terribly sorry, Exalted One. I’m afraid that I cannot agree to change my manner of address, even if it is at your request. I beg your forgiveness.” They bowed once more.

Flio’s smile was tight-lipped. *Honestly... They really won’t budge on this no matter how many times I ask, will they?*



Flio decided to relax in the living room for a minute and sat down to chat with Hiya and Damalynas. Rys had made them tea.

“By the way,” he said once the conversation had been going for a while, “there’s been something I’ve wanted to ask you, Damalynas.”

“Hm? Something you want to ask *me*?” Damalynas blinked in surprise.

“Yeah, it’s just that I think I’ve heard a number of people call you the Grand Magus of Midnight. I was wondering what that was about.”

“Oh, *that*.” Damalynas waved her hand and a book appeared in her grasp, seemingly from nowhere. “This book is known as the Midnight Grimoire. It was created by the greatest mage of old and the progenitor of the art of dark magic, Damalynas the Origin. Within its pages lies the knowledge of every dark magic in existence. I suppose you could call it something like a handbook. By custom, you see, any magic user who masters all of the secrets contained within this book earns the right to use the name Damalynas.”

“But I thought women who used magic were called witches, and that mage was the term for men,” interjected Flio. “How come you call yourself a mage? Or, ‘magus,’ I suppose.”

“Mm. Well, in the time of Damalynas the Origin, the words were used somewhat differently. Mage—or *magus*—wasn’t always a term reserved for men. It used to be a title that indicated a spellcaster had attained a certain level of mastery. One such as I, who has reached the pinnacle of dark magic, naturally would be far beyond that level and would therefore be known as Grand Magus. That’s simply the title the book gives to those it has acknowledged. It isn’t about to change

anytime soon.”

“The book itself gave you that title?”

“Indeed. It is the magic of the book itself that judges whether or not its holder has mastered the dark arts. If it decides you’ve fulfilled its requirements, it gives you the title.” Damalynas was puffing her chest out a little. This was all clearly a point of pride for her. “By the way, I, Damalynas the Apricot, received the title Grand Magus of Midnight after ninety-nine years of study and training. I am the first in history to master the dark arts in under a century.”

“Oh? That’s incredible, Damalynas!” said Flio.

“No, no, it’s really nothing that spec—well, actually, it absolutely is.” Damalynas scratched the back of her head and smiled bashfully, seemingly embarrassed by the praise.

“Wow... This book must have some amazing spells in it.”

Hiya, who was sitting between the two, nodded their head. “It does,” they said. “As Damalynas stated, it would be exceptionally difficult even for an advanced magic user to master it in less than a century.”

Damalynas giggled awkwardly. “W-Well, I suppose. Do... Do you want to have a look, Lord Flio?”

“Yeah!” he said. “I’m interested.” He took the tome from Damalynas.

“Huh?” As Flio’s hand touched the cover of the book, the Midnight Grimoire began to glow. The light spread to Flio’s hand. Both Hiya and Damalynas opened their eyes wide in shock. “What in the...?”

“Th-This never happened when *I* read the book...” said Damalynas. Before her eyes, countless words seemed to float out from the glowing book and were absorbed into Flio’s arm. They kept going and going, a staggering volume of words flying through the air and vanishing into Flio.

Flio could feel the words pouring into his mind over and over. More than that, he could understand them. No, it was more than simply *understanding*. The contents of the Midnight Grimoire were being directly absorbed by his brain.

He appeared utterly stupefied.

It didn’t take long at all. The light vanished as abruptly as it had appeared. “What... What just happened?” Flio asked. He stared at Damalynas with wide eyes.

“I... I... Well, I *saw* it happen,” she said. She was so disoriented that it was taking effort to speak coherently. “But that’s the first time in my life I’ve ever so much as *heard* of something like that. I certainly have no idea...” Next to her, Hiya was staring at the tome, their arms folded.

Then, from the book in Flio's hand, a figure appeared—a woman. She had silver hair that went down to her knees, almond eyes, and pointed ears like an elf's. Her outfit looked like an ancient mage's vestments with the shoulders rather daringly exposed. She seemed to regard Flio with a beguiling smile as she floated in the air.

"That's...the Grand Magus of Midnight...Damalynas the Origin..." Damalynas gulped.

Hiya stared at the woman and then nodded. "Hm... Yes, I seem to remember this woman. That is indeed Damalynas the Origin."

"So *that's* Damalynas the Origin..." Flio returned the floating woman's gaze.

Suddenly Damalynas the Origin raised her arm and pointed at Flio. "I offer my congratulations, you who have mastered the dark arts. You have earned the right to the name Damalynas, the Grand Magus of Midnight. Take care not to bring shame to our name." So saying, she smiled mysteriously and vanished. For a while, neither Flio nor Hiya nor Damalynas moved an inch.

When Flio had been summoned to this world, he was granted the blessing of Transcendence. One of the abilities it granted him was the power to learn any spell he had experienced even once. When he touched the tome, his ability reacted to the dark enchantments on the book itself, taking all of its knowledge for his own.

Flio, however, had no awareness of the abilities given to him by Transcendence and no idea what had happened to him just now. "Hey! C-Can anyone explain what that was?! She said I mastered the dark arts, but all I did was touch the book! I don't—" an expression of dismay crossed his face. He was clearly panicking.

For her part, Damalynas was staring in shock. "It... It took me ninety-nine years to learn the dark arts..." Her speech was faltering, and she had a grim expression on her face. "You really learned it all just by touching the book...?"

Hiya, their arms still folded, looked at Flio. "To master the Midnight Grimoire in such a short time... Truly you are the Exalted One." They nodded.

"No. No way! That can't be what happened, can it?!"

Damalynas, meanwhile, was staring blankly, her tortured smile plastered on her face.

And so it was that Flio obtained the title of Grand Magus of Midnight.

Loss and Grief

“Hey, what’s gotten into you all?” Company Leader Echenbach sounded surprised as he entered the barracks.

The knight Raine loudly sighed again at the question. His expression was miserable and forlorn. The knights sitting at the table around him looked no less depressed. Together they were making a veritable chorus of miserable sighs.

“Oh. Hello, Captain,” said Raine, glancing up at Echenbach for a second before looking down at his feet and sighing once more. As if in response, the other knights sighed at once.

“Don’t give me that!” Echenbach placed his hand on Raine’s shoulder and looked around at the other knights. “Did something happen? What’s wrong?”

Slowly, Raine lifted his head. “Nothing *happened*. It’s just, she’s *gone*.”

“She?”

“You have to know Balli; she was under your command...”

“Ah, yes. Balirossa left, along with her party. What of it?”

“What do you mean, *what of it...*?” Raine sighed again. “For years, the newcomers to our company were nothing but filthy men...and then suddenly in their midst, a goddess descended from the heavens...” And again, he sighed.

A number of the other knights stood up from their seats. “She was a paragon of chivalry. Everything she did, she always gave it her best,” said one.

“Her perfect face...” said another. “Her hair, fluttering in the breeze...”

“Even in her armor, you could tell that her body was something else...” said a third.

Raine nodded at everyone’s words. “She was our north star, the goddess who gave us life...and now she’s gone, just like that...” He sighed several times.

“And our relationship had just gotten to the point where we were saying good morning to each other every day...” said a knight.

“We were going to be on night patrol together...” said another.

“Next month we were going to be in the same unit for the regional patrols,” a third knight said. “We were going to spend a whole *month* together...”

As the knights offered their various contributions, Raine sighed even more heavily and slumped his shoulders.

“Get a hold of yourselves!” Echenbach snapped, looking around the room at his knights. “The Dark Army’s been quiet lately, but we never know when that’ll change. They could attack any day now!”

His words seemed to have no effect. The knights, Raine included, spared him no more than a single forlorn glance. “I mean...” said one.

“I know that, but...”

“It’s just...” said another. “How do I put it...?”

“It’s going to take a while to come to terms with, I think...” said a third.

The knights sighed.

Echenbach followed suit. “All this just because one girl left the company...”

◇Klyrode Castle—Stables◇

Norduca the armory chief had come to the stables where the knights’ war steeds and the horses for pulling wagons were kept. She was here for a regular observation, but something was clearly wrong. The horses were clearly in low spirits, moping dejectedly and hardly touching their hay. “Excuse me...” she said, confused. “Is there some problem here?”

Benimo, who worked in the stables, rushed out to meet her superior Norduca once she noticed her there. “Lady Norduca...”

Norduca cut her off. “There’s no need for that,” she said. “Can you tell me what’s wrong with the horses?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am...” said Benimo. “They’ve been like this ever since Byleri left. She used to be the one who took care of them, you know...”

“You found a replacement for her, didn’t you? But they’re still in this state...”

“We did... We’ve been working with the new staff as best we can, but the horses seem to get more depressed each day...”

Norduca massaged her temples. “I know Byleri was excellent with the horses, but there must be *someone* who can do her job...”

Just as she said the words, the horses raised their heavy heads to stare at her. Norduca took a step back, spooked by the horses’ strange behavior. “What in the world...?”

The horses began to bray. They seemed angry. Suddenly, the whole stable seemed to reverberate with the noise. Norduca pressed her hands against her ears to block out the terrible sound.

Could they possibly be angry that I’m not Byleri...?

Norduca began to sweat while she watched as the horses began to whinny with rage.

◇Klyrode Castle—Knight Captain’s Quarters◇

Knight Captain Valkas wore a thin-lipped, bitter smile as he read the report. “I see... I would have never expected the absence of two rookie knights to have such an effect,” he said. Folding his arms, he began to think aloud. “The knights will get over Balirossa on their

own, most likely, but what should I do about the horses?”

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. “Knight Captain, sir, permission to enter?”

“Come in,” said Valkas.

“Yes, sir. Excuse me.” A knight opened the door and stepped inside.

“What is it? Is something the matter?”

“Sir, we received an inquiry from a neighboring village. It seems that one of our knights—a woman—had been in the habit of going to their village to assist with farmwork on her days off. She hasn’t been coming recently, and they are concerned for her well-being...”

“Do you know this knight’s name?”

“Yes, sir. It seems she was called Blossom.”

Valkas grimaced. *What do you know*, he thought. *It’s another one of the knights who quit with Balirossa...* For a while he sat scowling and stewing in silence. “Tell them,” he said, “that Blossom has resigned as a knight for personal reasons, and that she is in good health.”

“Yes, sir.” The knight gave a salute and turned to leave.

No sooner had he exited the room than another knight entered. This one was a woman. “Might I have a word, Knight Captain?” she said.

“Oh? Captain Boralis of the Princess’s personal guard? What brings you here?”

Boralis saluted the knight captain. “I’m afraid I came here to ask a favor,” she began.

“Mm. Well, what is it?”

“Captain, would it be possible to assign a witch to the Princess’s guard? It’s been on my mind for a while now.”

“A witch?”

“Yes, Captain. I believe the recent incident with Damalynas demonstrates our need for stronger defenses against attacks on the Princess’s person. If you think well of it, of course.”

“I see...” said Valkas. “I understand your concern. Very well, I will speak with the captain of the Magic Corps and have them send you a list of candidates.”

“Actually,” said Boralis, “I have a specific person in mind.”

“You do? Who?”

“Among your knights, I believe, is a witch by the name of Belano. If at all possible, I would really like to have her...”

Again, Valkas grimaced at the name. “Ahhh... Well, you see...I’m terribly sorry, but Belano resigned recently, for *personal reasons*.”

“I...I see...”

“The Princess’s guards must be women, correct?” Valkas said. “It might take some time to find someone if you need a witch specifically

and not a mage.”

“I understand...” said Boralis, dejected. “Thank you for your assistance.” She saluted once more, and left the room.

“Wonder what’s with Ser Boralis?” Valkas stared curiously at the door the guard captain had left through. “She got good and depressed just from hearing that some inexperienced witch quit the knights...”



Boralis sighed heavily as she walked down the corridor. *I can’t believe it... Ser Belano quit the Magic Corps...*

Since she had been very young, Boralis had been surrounded by girls and women. She had been trained at an all-female knight academy and served her entire career with all-female teams. She became the company leader of a succession of all-female companies of knights, and finally she was selected as captain of the Princess’s all-female royal guard.

Over the course of many years in an environment surrounded by only women, she had developed a distinct proclivity—or perhaps you might say a fetish—for petite girls, the cuter the better. She had been taken by Belano from the moment she chanced to lay eyes on her, and had long entertained the fantasy of working together.

It was perfect! I could have at once strengthened the Princess’s guard and spent every day in the presence of Ser Belano... I can’t believe she quit...

Boralis’s shoulders slumped as she continued on her way.

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

Balirossa and her companions were sitting in the living room when they were overtaken by a sudden sneezing fit.

“Aah-choo!” sneezed Balirossa.

“Kerchoo!” sneezed Blossom.

“Choo!” sneezed Byleri.

Belano didn’t sneeze. Her body shook silently from a sudden cold. Her face was pale.

Flio, who had been sitting next to the four, turned to look at them. “Are you *all* coming down with a cold?” he asked. “We should try and get you all warmed up.”

Balirossa smiled grimly. “I...do not believe that that was a cold.”

“What does that mean?” said Blossom. “Someone’s spreadin’ rumors about us?”

“Wha?” said Byleri. “Like, that’s kinda embarrassing?”

Belano said nothing. She was still shivering.

The four shared a glance. They had no idea that they were such a

popular topic of conversation back in Castle Klyrode.

The College of Magic's Idol

◇Houghtow College of Magic◇

“And that’s it for today’s lecture!” Oryou, who was standing behind the podium, closed her textbook with a snap. Oryou taught offensive spells at the Houghtow College of Magic. She was from the Land of the Rising Sun, far to the east, and wore an exotic garment known as a kimono and had her hair done up with an ornate hairpin. She was very popular with her students thanks to her ability to speak candidly with anyone as well as her gorgeously proportioned figure.

Oryou stepped down from the podium and looked over at Belano, who was sitting in the front row. “Belano, you have a meeting after class, no? Shall we go together?” Belano nodded mutely and stuffed her notes and textbook into her oversized bag, slung it over her shoulder, and followed Oryou out of the room.

Shion was sitting near her and gave her a curious glance on her way out. *What’s happening with Miss Belano?* he wondered.

Shion was on the tall side and had a rather intense gaze. At first glance he looked like someone who would be difficult to approach, but he had a good natured and helpful personality, and had earned many friends among the students. Not long ago he had let his magic go out of control during an offensive magic class exercise and had been saved by Belano’s defensive spell. He had been trying to ask her out to lunch to thank her properly, but ever since that day, Belano would leave class immediately after it got out to go to the faculty office. He had yet to be given an opportunity.

He watched Belano leave. Once again he had missed his chance. “Why does she keep getting called to the faculty office?” he said, puzzled.

“Oh, you don’t know?” Another boy walked up beside him.

“I suppose you *do* know, then, Lacroix?”

“Of course!” Lacroix took a notepad out of his back pocket and began flipping through the pages. He was a short, heavyset boy who always seemed to be spacing out but who apparently had some sort of mysterious information network. It was widely accepted that nobody knew the goings-on at the school better than him.

Lacroix stopped flipping and opened his notepad to a particular page. “Here it is. The faculty was very impressed by that defensive spell Miss Belano cast the other day. I heard they’re going to make her a teacher.”

“What? Are you for real?”

“Of course. There isn’t anyone in the faculty who specializes in defensive magic. It sounds like they’ve been looking for a defensive magic teacher for a while.”

“I see...” Shion nodded. “Well, she is pretty incredible when it comes to defense.” *But wait...* he thought. *If Miss Belano is going to be a teacher here, I could take her class...* Shion looked back up at Lacroix. “Hey Lacroix,” he said. “Do you know when she’s gonna start teaching?”

“Of course I know that! I just finished registering for her class!” Lacroix took out a piece of paper and handed it to Shion. On it was written: “Notice of Enrollment: Defensive Magic Course (Available to Public) — Houghtow College of Magic.”

Shion’s eyes opened wide. “What?!! They’ve already started registration?!”

“They just started today. Just a few minutes ago, in fact.”

“Lacroix...” Shion fixed his friend with a look. “I *thought* you were taking a long time to use the toilet.”

“Oh? Whatever do you mean?” Lacroix looked back over his shoulders, making a show of whistling innocently. “Anyway, Shion, you had better hurry up and register yourself.”

Shion seemed to be thrown off balance by this. “Of course! You don’t have to tell me twice!”

“Naturally you’d want to attend the class taught by the girl you’ve been trying to ask out to lunch!”

“D-Don’t be ridiculous! I just want to take her to lunch to thank her for the other day! It has nothing to do with whether or not I *like* her.”

“What was that? All I said was ‘ask her out to lunch.’ I didn’t say one word about *liking* her.”

“Sh-Shut up! A-Anyway, I’m going to go register for her class!” Shion hurried out of the classroom, his face red, fully aware that he had said too much.

N-No... he thought. *It isn’t because I like her or anything. It’s true that she’s short and cute and just my type, but my motivations here are pure! I have no intention of...* Well, I mean, if it happens I’d be... No, no, no! What am I thinking?! I’m registering for her class because it would be kind of sad if she didn’t have a lot of students, and as her classmate I should try to make it a success! It’s not like I’m looking forward to seeing her face every day in front of the class... I’m not...

Shion sped down the hallway towards the administrative office, his mind racing furiously. But when he turned the corner, his eyes went wide as he stood stunned. There was a line leading out of the office and a paper sign which read: “Enrollment for new Defensive Magic Class Underway.”

Taclyde, a member of the College's administrative staff, spoke from behind the window. "Those hoping to register for the defensive magic class, please go to the back of the line. If you have other business, please line up here." None of the students in the line for the defensive magic registration moved. It seemed they had all come to the right place.

Shion had never expected Belano's class to be so popular. He glanced over to the front of the line. *Don't tell me I'm too late...* He broke out into a run for the back of the line, an urgent look on his face.

"Hey!" shouted Taclyde. "No running in the hallways!" Shion ignored him and took his place in line. The line stretched forward in the direction he had come from. He wasn't the last either. Student after student lined up behind him. Shion began to sweat.

Where did all these people come from?! he thought, craning his head to look at the front. Belano hardly spoke to her fellow students and immersed herself fully in her studies, but she was small and dainty and she always gave her all in class and practice. She was like a tiny, cute little animal doing her best, and many of her fellow students wanted to cheer her on. At some point, they had grown into a veritable crowd.

Shion never expected this in his wildest dreams. He was becoming agitated at the wait. Time and time again he tried to steal glances at the front of the line. *It can't be much longer... Come on, come on, come on...*

◇Houghtow College of Magic—A Hallway◇

With their preparations in the faculty office concluded, Belano and Oryou stepped into the hallway and set out to look over the room where Belano's class would be conducting practical exercises.

As they walked, Belano noticed an exceptionally long line leading towards the administrative office. She looked over, curiosity written on her face, but said nothing. Oryou noticed her expression and followed her gaze to see where Belano was looking.

"Oh?" she said. "That's quite the queue. I wonder what could be happening in the administrative office?" She thought it over for a second. "Hmm... Well, we can ask Taclyde about it later. Come along, Belano. Let's go to the exercise room. I'll give you a simple explanation of how everything works."

Belano nodded in assent, and Oryou led her down the hallway. Neither of them would have ever guessed that the queue was full of students hoping to register for Belano's class. It would be a little while until they learned the truth.

Observation Log, Subject: Flio

“Hey, Rys, hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long.” Rys had been waiting to the side of the entrance to the Merchant’s Guild building, keeping a low profile so as to not get in the way of Flio’s work. She smiled at Flio’s greeting.

“Not at all!” she said. She walked up to her husband and attached herself to his right arm. “Did your business go smoothly?”

“It did! And that’s everything taken care of for today.” Flio returned Rys’s smile. “So, ready to find somewhere to eat lunch?”

“Of course!” Rys wrapped her arms tighter around Flio’s, beaming up at him.

As Flio and Rys went about their day, a girl stood on the roof of a nearby building, watching them. She had cast Concealment on herself and her surroundings so as not to be seen as she stared intently at the happy couple walking down the crowded streets. On her back was a pair of wings—a clear sign that she was not human—but they did not look like the wings of an avian demihuman.

This was Dia, a follower of the goddess Blanchet who reigned over this world.

It is our task as celestials to watch over the people of this world... Still, we are meant not to intervene... she thought as she took gracefully to the air and alighted on the city street.

Mixed in among the humans walking through the town, she followed along behind Flio and Rys. *There is something odd about this man called Flio. He cast the greatest holy spell by himself in the Delaveza forest, even turned back time when he faced the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness... Even a celestial would be hard pressed to perform such feats. For a human to be capable of them is far outside of our expectations.* She knitted her brow as she considered everything Flio had done.

Suddenly, and quite surprising to Dia, a magic circle appeared beside where Flio was walking. It rotated in place for a moment before out stepped Hiya. They were dressed as they usually were with a thin cloth wrapped around their body, a halo shining behind their head. They must have been using magic to conceal their presence. At least, none of the townsfolk milling about seemed to notice a magic circle appearing in their midst, or Hiya herself.

“Exalted One,” they said.

“That’s the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness,” Dia hissed through clenched teeth, watching as Hiya bowed reverentially before Flio. “I had heard they had become one of his followers. I suppose that was true... This was dangerous enough when it was only Flio. With both of them here...I may be in real peril.”

Dia hid herself in the shadows and continued watching as yet another magic circle appeared and a woman emerged. She had dark skin and wore the purple outfit of a witch. When she saw who it was, Dia's eyes widened with shock.

"Th-That's the Grand Magus of Midnight, Damalynas the Apricot! Wait. Was she one of Flio's followers too?" Dia swallowed as she watched Damalynas begin to speak with Flio and Rys as if they were all good friends. "This is bad," she muttered to herself. "That man by himself can use the highest level of holy magic and even manipulate time. And now the djinn Hiya and the Grand Magus of Midnight Damalynas are with him—two of the five most powerful magic users in the world... I must report this to my Goddess at once..." She gave the four another glance. They were talking about something.

"Then, Exalted One, you were already aware of that person's presence?" asked Hiya.

Flio smirked wryly. "Yeah. She's using Concealment, I think, but even so, it's not like I'm going to miss someone who insists on following me all the time. I don't think she's from this world, but I don't think she means any harm for the time being. I'm just waiting to see what she's planning." As Flio finished, he called up a window. Inside the window was an image of Dia, watching the party from the shadows a ways away. "I made a bug into a familiar and sent it to keep an eye on her. I don't *think* she's a threat..."

What are they looking at in that window? Dia was still watching intently as Flio showed his party the image of her. There were a number of bugs flying around in the air above her head. She had no idea that one of those bugs was Flio's familiar.

"Exalted One," said Hiya after they had taken a good look at Dia through Flio's window, "shall I take care of the matter? I could dispose of her very quickly." They touched their hand to their chest and gave another deep bow.

"You don't need to do that yourself, Your Divinity!" said Damalynas. She pointed to herself with her index finger. "Say the word and I'll turn her into fish food. It won't take a second."

Next, Rys pulled on Flio's arm. "How dare she spy on my lord husband?!" she said. "I'll get rid of her in a flash." She began to turn into her wolf form.

Flio placed his hand on Rys's head and looked around at his three companions. "Rys, Hiya, Damalynas, it's all right. There's no need to do that."

"But my lord husband! We can't just overlook someone following you!" said Rys.

"Indeed. You speak true, mistress," said Hiya. "To shadow the Exalted One is an act worthy of death."

“I agree,” said Damalynas. “I’d feel like I wasn’t a proper Grand Magus of Midnight if we didn’t wipe her off the face of the world.”

The three crowded around Flio, demanding to be allowed to take care of Dia. Flio’s smile looked very strained. “W-Well, I mean, I don’t sense much in the way of hostility from her. And she isn’t hurting anyone just by watching us...”

“If you say so, my lord husband,” grumbled Rys.

“Very well,” said Hiya. “But if she ever shows even the slightest sign of hostility towards the Exalted One, I, Hiya, shall exterminate her with extreme prejudice.”

“I told you, Your Divinity, there’s no need to trouble yourself with her! Please leave her to your faithful Damalynas.”

Reluctantly, the three agreed to do things Flio’s way.

I wish I could hear what they were saying... Dia was still stealthily watching the group from her hiding place, blissfully unaware that they had been discussing the question of whether or not to eliminate her. She still didn’t know that they were aware of her presence. *Well, I should try to learn as much as I can. I want to have a lot of information when I report to my Goddess...* Dia nodded to herself as Flio’s bug flew around above her, keeping a watchful eye.

Gold-Hair and Tsuya: Tsuya Gets a Job

◇In a Tavern◇

A little after sunset, two men stepped through the door of a tavern. They were greeted with a cheerful “Hiii! Weelcome! Come on in!” from Tsuya, who was serving customers inside and at that moment grinning from ear-to-ear. She jogged up to the door, eager to greet the two new customers. This was a successful establishment, and there were several other girls beside Tsuya working at the moment. They followed after her to give the men their own welcomes.

Tsuya and Hero Gold-Hair were wanted criminals on the run, and Tsuya had come to work in this tavern in order to earn funds for their life on the road. She had to choose where to work carefully. This was a good establishment for her to find work because they didn’t put up wanted posters from Castle Klyrode, but it didn’t exactly attract the *best* customers. As you might imagine, the girls working here were showing quite a lot of skin as they entertained the guests. This suited Tsuya just fine—it was her preference not to wear much in the way of clothes as is. She stood unashamed as she welcomed the customers.

One of the two adventurers spoke to Tsuya. “Hey, haven’t seen you before. You new?”

“I aaam!” Tsuya said, grinning just as wide as before. “I just

started todaaaay! My name's Tsuyaia!" She gave them the false name she was using for this job, and led the two into the building.

"Whad'ya think?" one of the men whispered to his partner. "The new girl's pretty hot, right?"

"No kidding..." the other whispered back. "Big tits, thick ass...and her waist is so slender it's like you could fold her in half..." They were practically salivating as they stared at her from behind.

Hiya led the men to an empty table, stopped, and turned around.

"Is this table all riiight?" Both men just stared. "Ummm... Siiirs?"

"Huh? Oh! The table! Y-Yes ma'am, this one's fine!"

"Y-yes! I'm fine too, yes ma'am!"

The two men had been so completely entranced staring at Tsuya's behind that it had taken them a good few seconds to notice she was speaking to them. Stiffly, they awkwardly took their seats. "Can I take your oorder?" Tsuya asked.

"Yeah, let's start with some drinks."

"Drinks and some snacks!"

Tsuya smiled. "Thank yooou," she chirped. "I'll be back with your driinks!" She went off towards the kitchen as the two men went back to ogling her backside.

"Hey..." said one of the men. "You wanna see if that girl will give us some *extra service*?"

"I think any of the girls here will, if you have the money."

"Wow, nice! Let's try it!" He flashed a thumbs up, and the other man returned the gesture.

Suddenly, a man's voice came from beside them. "You..."

The men yelped in unison. At some point, this stranger had come up beside their table. He was wearing a heavy cloak with the hood pulled low over his eyes. He brought his head in close.

"That woman is not some harlot! If you speak to her like that..." he trailed off, taking something out from deep within his cloak. The men's eyes went wide when they saw what it was.

Is that...a shovel? They looked up at the man in disbelief, frozen to the spot. There was a strange sense of menace in the man's eyes. Somehow they couldn't look away. There was part of them that wanted to put him in his place—his weapon was a shovel, after all! But confronted by his intense stare, they found that they couldn't speak a word.

"I've given you a warning," said the man in a low voice. "If you chose to ignore it...well, I think we understand each other." And with that, he left. The two watched him leave in stunned silence.

"Sooorry for the waaait!" said Tsuya, who had returned from the kitchen carrying a pair of tankards. "Heeere's your driinks!" She was

grinning just like before as she handed them over. "I'll go get your snacks next, if you'll waaait a little longeeer!"

Tankards in hand the two watched Tsuya go back to the kitchen and then glanced at each other. "So...what now?" one said, quietly.

"What do you mean, 'what now'?"

"We should probably give up on her, right?"

"Yeah...probably."

The pair nodded and took a drink.



The night was half-over by the time Tsuya left. "See you lateer!" she called to the rest of the workers and then headed out the back door.

A man in a heavy cloak came up quietly behind her. Tsuya smiled happily when she saw him. "Hero Gold-Haaair! You came to pick me uuup!" She jogged over to her partner. Hero Gold-Hair made sure she was following him, and then wordlessly walked off in the opposite direction.

Tsuya took hold of Gold-Hair's arm and pressed her body close. She had a short coat on top, but on her lower body she was wearing nothing but the scanty clothes she had worn to work. Hero Gold-Hair took off his cloak and put it on her. "But Hero Gold-Haaair, what if you catch a cooold? It's sooo chilly tonight..."

"Just wear it. I have a high body temperature."

"You dooo? Well, okaaay, thank you!" She attached herself back to Gold-Hair's arm, smiling fondly up at him.

"Anyway, Tsuya, I can't say I think much of that tavern. Is there really not anywhere better?"

"Huuuh? What do you meeean? They don't have waaanted posters, and they pay wages at the end of each daaay! It seems good to meee!"

"But what about the low-life customers?! And do you *really* have to dress like that? I don't care what anyone says, that outfit shows *way* too much skin!"

"Whaaat? I think the outfit is cuuute. I like it! O-Oh, do you think it looks baaad on meee?" Tsuya looked up at Gold-Hair, suddenly worried.

Hero Gold-Hair blushed. "N-No! I mean...whether it looks good or bad has no bearing on the matter!"

"Oh, gooood!" Tsuya smiled happily, and pulled Hero Gold-Hair's arm close, sandwiching it between her breasts. Tsuya did things like that wholly without meaning to. His arm now stuck in her cleavage, Hero Gold-Hair found that he had entirely lost the power of speech. The two left in silence.

“Oh, Hero Gooold-Hair! One of the cuuustomers told me about some seeecret treasure called the Chaaampion’s Edge! It sounds like it’s nearbyyy!”

“What? Is that true?!”

“It iiis! They even told me mostly where it iiis!”

“Well then! We should be off at once! I want to get my hands on this sword!”

“Whaaat? Right noooow? But I juuust finished work! I neeeded to reeest!”

“F-Fine! All right! We’ll find an inn, so stop rubbing your chest all over me! But we’re off first thing in the morning! And mind your chest!”

The two kept chatting as they went on their way through the city, vanishing into the crowd.

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by Miya Kinojo

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